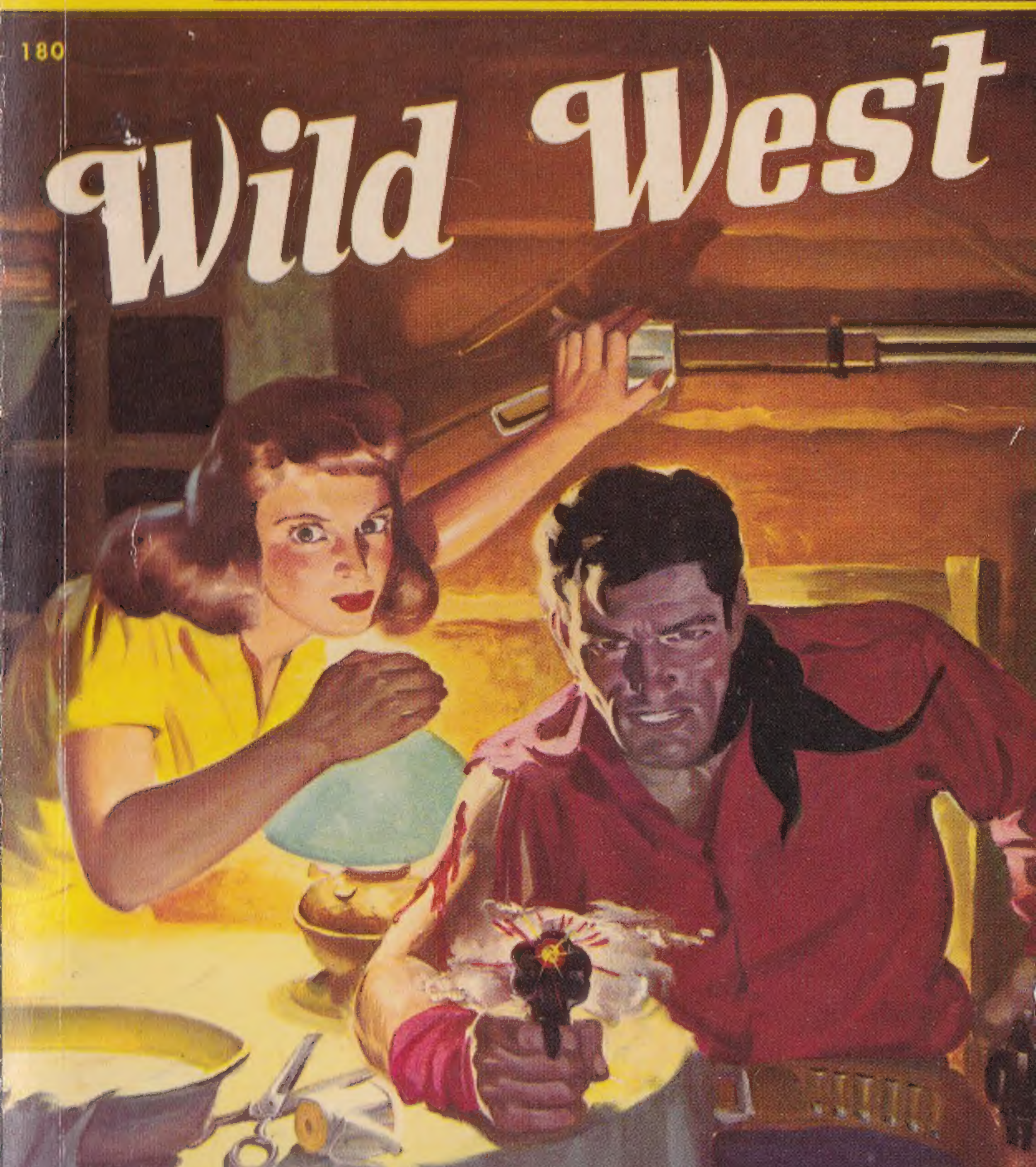
POPULAR LIBRARY

180

HOT LEAD FOR BEEF RUSTLERS

Wild West



BERTRAND W. SINCLAIR

A WESTERN NOVEL

WILD WEST

By BERTRAND
W. SINCLAIR

POPULAR LIBRARY • NEW YORK

POPULAR LIBRARY EDITION

COMPLETE AND UNABRIDGED

The issuance of this new edition at a low price is made possible by (a) the acceptance by the author of a reduced royalty and (b) the smaller size and less expensive binding of this edition as compared to the original cloth-bound edition published by Little, Brown & Company.

COPYRIGHT, MCMXXVI, BY BERTRAND W. SINCLAIR
PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

Published by arrangement with Little, Brown & Company

CHAPTER I

THE STRAW IN THE WIND

WHERE a long spur of Chase Hill pitched down to the broken land bordering on Birch Creek, Robin Tyler came on what he had been seeking since sunrise. He pulled up his horse, sat sidewise in his saddle to roll a cigarette, to stare over the country, out over the wide roll of grassy ridges and sagebrush flats that ended abruptly in the confusion of the Bad Lands. As his eye marked single dots and groups of dots that were cattle and horses at rest and in motion, both near and far, a trampling of hoofs in a hollow below made his head turn sharply. He saw within a hundred yards the back and head and ears of a single animal and jumped his horse into a gallop with a touch of the spurs.

He recognized that arched neck and brilliant mane; it flashed in the sun like burnished copper.

"Oh, you Red Mike," he shouted, "you'll have to burn the earth now to keep me from ridin' you on round-up."

In two jumps the gray cow horse Robin bestrode bounded over the low ridge. Below and beyond, a bunch of range horses, twenty or more, as wild as the elk that once grazed those slopes, stretched themselves like hounds on the trail of a running wolf. They were headed for a water hole and Robin was cutting them off. They lay low to the ground, manes and tails streaming, their hoofs beating the turf with a roll like snare drums. The horse Robin had shouted at ran in the lead, a beautiful sorrel beast with four white stockings and a star in his forehead. Red Mike knew what a mounted man on his trail meant. He was all for freedom. Behind him thundered the wild mares with their colts.

For a week, at odd times, Robin had been looking for that particular horse. Now he stood in his stirrups, whooping in sheer exultation of the chase. It didn't matter how much he

excited them. They were as wild as hawks and would run themselves out anyway. He meant to head them off from water, turn them back up the ridge and when they tired he would bunch them in a corral he knew, rope out Red Mike and lead him home.

He headed the wild bunch and turned them once. But a badger hole hidden in the grass undid him. The gray put a forefoot in the hole, went down as if shot, rolled over twice and scrambled to his feet, trembling. Robin fell clear, unhurt, except for the jar.

He gathered up the reins, swung to his saddle. The gray took a step. Robin dismounted, stood looking with a frown. His mount had twisted a leg, wrenched a shoulder. He walked on three feet. Riding him was out of the question.

"Damn all badgers, anyway!" young Tyler muttered.

He looked after the band of broom tails streaking it westward up the ridge. As he watched they came to a stop, stood with up-pricked ears. Robin knew precisely what they would do; stand awhile, circle wide and make for that watering place by a cautious detour.

He wanted Red Mike. He needed him now more than ever. And he was afoot in the blistering mid-summer heat, fifteen miles from the nearest ranch, in a region where no rider could be expected to heave in sight.

Robin lifted his hat and ran his fingers through a thatch of brown, curly hair.

He was hot and thirsty. Walking in high-heeled boots under a blazing sun was not his idea of pleasure.

"I hate to leave you, old *caballo,*" he said whimsically, "but I guess I'll bid you a fond farewell."

With which he stripped his riding gear off the gray and turned him loose, undid the fifty-foot *reata* from the bulging fork of his saddle and with the coils in his hand bore straight down the hill leaving his saddle, bridle and leather chaps in the grass, and the gray horse staring after him.

Below him, in the gut of that coulee, a small spring of clear water trickled out of a sandy hillside. Among the seepage grew clumps of willows. In that screen a man could lie perdu with his loop spread for a throw. If Red Mike and his friendly broncs came down to drink he still had a chance. If they smelled

or sighted him and dodged Cold Spring they would bear down into the bed of Birch Creek. He would follow. It was no more than a mile or two. Or he would lie at Cold Spring. He still had hopes of snaring a mount. Small bands of wild horses would drift in to drink. Among the wild ones there was often an odd saddle horse, enjoying temporary escape from ranch or round-up. At any rate he did not propose to walk home. It wasn't done! At the worst he could snare an unbroken horse, hog-tie him, pack the saddle down, and make the untamed one bear him somewhere.

Robin was a rider. He preferred them gentle, but he could ride. So he trudged toward the spring, keeping to the low ground, hoping that Red Mike would not change his flighty horse mind about where he wanted to drink.

Evidently Red Mike did. Robin lay behind the willows until mid-afternoon, parched by the heat, chafing at inaction. Of all the roving bands of horses none trooped into Cold Spring. The wild cattle came down, drank, lay in the grass until the slopes near by carried a thousand head of resting longhorns. Some got wind of him and departed in haste, snuffing and tossing their heads.

It did seem to Robin as if that fifteen-mile tramp grew more threatening.

He decided to take a chance on Birch Creek. It was no great way to the high banks that overlooked the deep sage-covered bottoms through which a lukewarm stream slunk like a great lazy snake, looping fold on fold. He stole away from Cold Spring with care to dodge the range cattle, to whom a man afoot was an unknown sight, a strange upright creature to be attacked or fled from as their bovine impulses chanced.

A little before Robin gained the first cut-bank whence he could look into Birch Creek bottoms for a horse, he heard a shot, then a second and a third. Robin had a keen ear. He recognized those reports as from a rifle. It held no particular significance, beyond the fact that shooting argued riders somewhere near, and a rider could soon solve the problem of a mount for Robin Tyler. Since these shots came from the bottom directly below him, Robin broke into a trot to reach the rim of the bank and call to the man or men below, if they were within hearing distance.

What he saw made him drop flat and do his looking through a fringe of long grass.

Robin had grown up in a cow country. There was little pertaining to the range, lawful or unlawful, which had escaped his awareness. So he was at no loss to read the signs below.

What he could not read were the brands involved nor the faces of the two men. The three dead cows, dark lumps in the gray sage, the three well-grown calves hog-tied for the running-iron that made little wisps of blue smoke puff from their ribs, were an open book to him. It was as old as the cow business, that trick. It originated in Texas in the chaos following the Civil War. In the years since it had been intermittently practiced with varying success from the Pecos River to the Canada line—and beyond.

Robin knew the *modus operandi*. You had a few cattle on the range. You owned a duly registered brand. You rode abroad in lonely places, where range riders seldom came except when the round-up swept through. Having found a cow with a desirable calf you shot the cow, roped the calf, ran your brand on him and hazed the orphan off two or three miles from his dead mother. Then you rode on and repeated the operation. Presently, if you were wary, well-mounted, a good roper, and craftily evaded being caught in the act, your natural increase assumed great proportions. The cow, being dead, could not embarrassingly claim a calf bearing a brand not her own. A dead cow here and there on the range excited no comment. Cows died from a variety of causes.

The cattleman knows that to his sorrow and the cowboy accepted dead cattle as he accepted the sun and the wind and rain, as natural properties of his environment.

Only—when too many cows were found to be dying of sudden death there were sure to be riders abroad with Winchester carbines under their stirrup-leathers. It was apt to be unhealthy for those who sought to augment their herd by other than natural increase.

Since every rustler knew that, he himself was not likely to permit anyone to view his activities with rope and iron and depart untroubled. Hence Robin Tyler lay very quiet in the grass.

He was unarmed, to begin with. He was not sure that he

wished to know the identity of those two men, the brands on the dead cows nor the fresh iron marks on the calves. That knowledge spelled trouble. Somehow Robin had a distaste for trouble of a personal nature. He had seen plenty. He wasn't combative. He seemed to have little of that primitive instinct to fight, to kill, to harry other men, which crops out now and then in even highly civilized persons.

Yet, as he stared at the two men in the silent flat, now flinging themselves across their saddles to start the stolen calves to new feeding grounds afar, he felt a touch of resentment. He had an intuitive knowledge of what brand could be read on those dead cows, because he was sure he knew one of the men—the flash and glitter of sun on silver ornaments as the rider's horse wheeled and danced under the restraining bit gave Robin this unwelcome knowledge; unwelcome, because if confirmed, it was knowledge upon which he would have to act, if he dared. Would he dare?

He didn't know.

When they were gone out of sight down the Birch Creek flats hazing the calves before them on the run, Robin turned back to Cold Spring.

7

CHAPTER II

"KEEP OFF THE GRASS!"

THE range cattle had finished their siesta and grazed afar when Robin once more hid among the willows. He was hungry but he had the solace of tobacco. He waited with dogged patience. Perhaps the broom-tails Red Mike ran with would yet come. If not there was always the chance of others. If the cool of evening brought no mount within reach of his loop he could still walk home.

So Robin lay thinking about those dead cows and the men who shot them. He couldn't get rid of the certainty that came over him when silver conchos on bit and spur and saddle flashed in the sun. He knew the man. He was aware that he could be mistaken. Other riders caparisoned with silver ornaments could be abroad on that range. But the first conviction held.

Hornets and wild bees hummed among the willows. Meadow larks swooped to the cold water, washed, preened their feathers, swung on low bushes and caroled their sweet, throaty songs within ten feet of him. Pungent odors from sagebrush bruised by hoofs, the faint smell of mud stirred by watering cattle, all the manifold airs off a wide, hot land wafted across his nostrils as he lay there. The sun dipped westward, fiery in the crystal blue. The willows supplied a grateful shade. He grew drowsy, dozed, and was wakened by nickering and the thud of hoofs.

Luck had come his way. His sorrel horse stood with forefeet in the mud, drinking from the cold trickle. The band was ranged about the spring. Red Mike had set himself as if posed to receive the waiting loop, within range of a short and easy throw for a hand as true as Robin Tyler's whose first toy had been a rawhide string.

He made one end of the rope fast to the root of a willow, edged clear, shook his loop out. Then he rose and threw in the

same motion and the loop swished over Red Mike's ears and tightened about his glossy neck before he could so much as toss his head.

One frightened surge against Robin's weight on the *reata* and the red horse stood still, wide-eyed with surprise, but knowing himself a prisoner. Robin went up to him gently, patted his neck, stroked him, talked to him soothingly. The red horse nuzzled him. When Robin took a turn over his nose with the rawhide the beast followed him like a dog on a leash.

Half an hour later he was mounted. Red Mike pranced and side-stepped and pawed the earth with impatience, a thing of steel and whalebone with the fire of life in it and Robin's spirits rose as if he had drunk wine.

The gray fed close by, nursing his lame leg. Robin left him without regret, much gainer by the exchange. Red Mike was his own horse. He had never felt another man's steel in his ribs. He was worth two of the gray. So Robin turned lightly homeward.

But before the sorrel had spurned a mile of the dry earth with his eager hoofs Robin changed his course, and swung down into Birch Creek. He had to see the brand on those dead cows. Why he *had* to he didn't trouble to define. In the back of his mind, unadmitted, there was a motive—and the motive was simple loyalty to his salt. Mostly the rustler preyed on the big outfits, and the riders of the big outfits sometimes did not see more than they chose to see on the range. But cattleman and cow-puncher alike despised a thief who stole from a poor man. And somehow Robin Tyler had to know if those dead cows carried Dan Mayne's brand.

They did. At least one did. Robin dropped his rope over the stiffened legs, took a dally round the born and turned the animal brand side up. He saw the Bar M Bar. He did not tarry to look at the other two lying fifty yards apart, for as he leaned from his saddle to free the noose something went *phut* in the sandy soil and scattered dust in his face. Red Mike jumped, snorted. A noise like the pop of a distant whiplash sounded away off and high above.

Robin bent low over his saddle horn and gave Red Mike his head. The sorrel crossed the Birch Creek flats like a candidate for the Derby. As the dust rolled out in a banner from under

his flying feet Robin glanced back over his shoulder. He saw two riders standing bold against the sky line on the farther crest of the valley and one of these riders gave off faint shiny reflections when his horse moved in the sun, and there was also a glint of metal in this rider's hand.

They didn't shoot again. The range was too great to hit anything in motion except by a fluke. They had scared him off and that, Robin surmised, was all they wanted. They sat there while Robin put a mile between himself and those dead cows as speedily as a fast and powerful horse could cover the distance. Then he pulled Red Mike to a walk, took to the high ground west of Birch Creek and pointed his nose for another water hole.

He rode into the Mayne ranch in the cool dusk having jingled around the south end of Chase Hill to pick up three more saddle horses in their usual haunts. He turned them into a small pasture, put Red Mike in the stable, with an armful of hay to munch. Then he shed his spurs and chaps and walked over to the house. A light glowed in the kitchen windows.

Robin paused in the doorway to look at a girl lifting warm food from the stove and placing it on the table. Ivy Mayne was worth a look. For a long time now, wherever he rode, unless the business in hand required his undivided attention, Robin carried in his mind a picture of this eldest daughter of Mayne's. He could have told you just how each separate coil of her glossy, dark hair wound about her head, what dimples came and went at the corners of her red mouth when she smiled. He knew that her skin was like satin and her voice a sweet treble like the thrushes that sang in the pine thickets of the Bear Paws. She was eighteen and Robin was twenty-two and they had lived under the same roof, galloped in the same hot sun and under the same silver moon, faced the blustering plains wind and lain in the grass together to stare silent at the winking stars, for a little over two years. There was not, Robin felt, her like for beauty and sweetness in all the pine-clad jumble of the mountains that loomed high in the velvet night to the northward of her father's ranch.

He always felt a queer flutter inside him when he was away from her and came back. He felt it now as she looked over her shoulder at his step.

"Did you ride clean out of the country?" she asked. "Everybody's gone to bed. I've been keepin' your supper warm, but you'd 'a' eaten cold stuff in another half hour, Mister Man. Hungry? Or did you strike some place to eat?"

"Uh-uh. I'm starved." Robin never wasted words.

"Where'd you go?"

He told her briefly of his mishap with the badger hole, and his snaring of Red Mike at Cold Spring. Her eyes danced.

"You sure do go into jack-pots and out of them oftener than any rider in this country."

Robin smiled. It was true. Old man Mayne had once irritably told him that if he didn't go around dreaming he'd save himself a lot of trouble.

"Mark Steele and another fellow stopped in for supper," Ivy remarked presently.

Robin halted his coffee cup in mid-air.

"What for?" he inquired mildly. "Thought Shining would be at the Block S getting organized for beef-gathering."

"How would I know?" Ivy replied. "They said they were just ridin' around. They come in from the south. I saw 'em a long way off. Mark asked where you were."

"You tell him?"

Robin knew neither Ivy nor any one else could guess where he rode to look for Red Mike that day. He hadn't known himself where he would go when he started.

"Dad said you were huntin' horses."

"Don't you tell nobody, not a soul, not even the old man, what I just told you about lamin' the gray and catching Red Mike by Cold Spring," Robin warned. "Keep that to yourself, Ivy. Will you? Forget it."

"Why?" she demanded instantly.

"Nothing a-tall," he parried. "Well, I have got a reason."

"All right, Robin, I won't tell," she agreed. Then, laughingly: "You haven't started draggin' the long rope, have you, that you don't want nobody to know where you rode to-day?"

"Dragging the long rope," is a range euphemism for stealing other men's cattle, specifically unbranded calves.

"No," Robin said shortly. "But somebody else is. *Sabe?*"

She nodded. Robin had seen something. He didn't want it known he had been where he *might* have seen anything. Some-

times it was not good for a man's health to see too much, or to talk openly about what he saw. Ivy herself was a child of the range.

She understood, nodded comprehension.

"I won't talk."

Robin leaned over the table to kiss her.

"If that silver-spangled *hombre* rides this way too often I'll get to worryin'," he whispered. "Reckon you could get to like him, Ivy, the way you like me?"

The eternal feminine flickered in Ivy's dusky eyes.

"I don't know," she murmured. "Maybe. I don't think I'd want to. I reckon I'd be a little afraid of him. I guess he'd be a pretty bad actor if he got going."

She put her elbows on the table and nursed her round face in her hands.

"Everybody sort of seems to step soft around Mark," she said reflectively. "Dad's a little bit afraid of him. So's other men. Are you?"

"I wouldn't advertise myself," Robin said.

He sat tracing a formless pattern on the oilcloth with his finger for a minute. Then he rose. A faint, nameless depression afflicted him whenever he linked Ivy Mayne and Mark Steele in his mind.

"It'll be daylight before you can sneeze twice," he said. "I guess I'll turn in. I'll have to step high and wide to-morrow."

He turned to put his arm across Ivy's shoulders, to pat her smooth hair. She smiled at him and blew him a kiss from her finger tips as he went out the door. She herself was sound asleep in her bed within twenty minutes—while Robin lay on his blankets in a detached bunk house listening to the audible slumber of a ranch hand in the opposite corner. He lay tired but sleepless, turning over and over in his mind the connection between those dead cows, Mark Steele, Ivy's father, Ivy herself, and his own part in the play.

Should he tell Mayne about those slaughtered cattle and voice his certainty about the man who shot them? Both Mayne and Robin knew that for two seasons now there had been a peculiar shortage in the Bar M Bar calf crop. What Robin saw that afternoon in Birch Creek bottom furnished the key to that shrinkage.

But he knew Mayne. Shining Mark Steele had Mayne buffaloed. He would grumble and swear when Robin told him. But would he act? And if he didn't act the thing would fester in his mind and sometime when he was drunk he would talk. Once he opened his mouth Robin Tyler was a marked man.

Robin stared up at the dusky ridge logs. He had no desire to have his light put out by any bushwhacking cow thief. Then he shrugged his shoulders and tried to sleep. In the morning—Robin didn't consciously say so, but he had a feeling that such problems could better be solved in broad day than by lying awake in the dark.

He rose with the sun. Sometime that day he was due to leave to join the Block S crew as a representative of the Bar M Bar on the fall round-up. He had a couple of tender-footed horses to shoe, a few odds and ends of gear to repair. He was a busy youth until noon. Not until dinner was past and his string was bunched in the corral with one horse saddled and his bed and war-bag packed across another did he have any extended conversation with Dan Mayne. They sat side by side on the top rail now, looking down on the sleek backs of Robin's cow ponies. Mayne had given him instructions about shipping beeves and fallen silent.

"I seen a dead cow yesterday," Robin said at last. "A Bar M Bar."

"Wolves?" Mayne grunted.

"Yeah. Two-legged ones," Robin exploded. The words rushed out of him. "She was bit with a .30-.30."

Mayne looked at him, growled something through his scraggly, dispirited mustache.

"I guess that's how you're short on calves," Robin continued. "Probably there's quite a few Bar M Bar cows dyin' of heart failure that way—when they happen to have big, unbranded calves that was missed on the spring round-up."

"The shrinkage ain't natural, that's a fact," Mayne grumbled. "We tallied a hundred less calves this year than last. Should 'a' been a good increase. It wasn't no hard winter."

They sat wordless a minute.

"Somebody's stealin' you blind," Robin asserted at last.

"I guess so," Mayne admitted peevishly. He bent a shrewd eye on his man. "You got an idea who, ain't you?"

"That's all I have got, just an idea," Robin declared. "And if I go bellerin' that idea out loud I might get daylight let through me some day when I ain't lookin'. I'd ride a lot, if I was you, with a Winchester handy."

"You seen more'n a dead cow yesterday, kid," Mayne challenged. "Spit it out. Where was you? What happened?"

Robin told him. But he stopped short of uttering his conviction that one of the riders was Mark Steele. The information he did divulge he cautioned Mayne about keeping to himself. That was as far as he dared go. If Mayne took two drinks too many some day and shot off his mouth about Mark Steele, Shining Mark would go gunning for him, Robin Tyler, not for Dan Mayne.

The old man scowled, tugging at his mustache.

"I've suspicioned somebody was workin' on me," he said irritably. "This cinches it. Keep your eye peeled for fresh ironwork while you're with the Block S. I'll get out and ride. By God!" he snarled in a sudden gust of resentment, "I sure do hate a cow thief. And you ain't got *no* hunch who these two was?"

Robin hesitated. There was no guile in him. He was loyal, with the peculiar, single-minded loyalty that speckled Western America with cow-puncher's graves, from the Staked Plains of Texas to Milk River in the north.

No feudal baron ever took the field with more devoted followers than the men who rode for the cattle kings when the range was in its full pastoral flower.

"One of 'em," he blurted out, "the one that smoked me up, was right flashy with silver. I ain't namin' no names."

Mayne stared at him. His faded blue eyes blinked rapidly.

"Great snakes!" he muttered. "I don't blame you. That sure makes it bad."

He scowled reflectively.

"The question is——"

"The question is," Robin finished the sentence in his own way, "is he stealin' for the Block S or for himself."

"If he's stealin' for the outfit I got about as much chance on this range as a snowball in hell," Mayne answered moodily. "If it's his own iron, I got a show. I wish you'd seen what brand went on them calves."

"I was afoot, I told you. I don't pack a gun. I ain't a damn fool." Robin protested.

"You're all right, kid." The old man put his hand on Robin's shoulder. "You're no gun man, but you'll burn your share of powder if you ever have to, I guess. Keep your eyes open around the Block S. I'll find them fresh-branded calves, if it takes me all fall. And if you're right——"

He spat angrily into the dust and got down off the fence.

When Robin drew clear of the ranch, jogging behind his string of thirteen mounts, old man Mayne rode out the other way, headed for Cold Spring with a blanket on the back of his saddle and food in his saddle pockets. Robin waved his hat to Ivy a last time before a dip in the rolling land hid the ranch from sight.

A mile above the Bar M Bar he turned his horse back into the creek bed, the same fork of Birch Creek that flowed by Mayne's house. Willows lined the course of the stream. Under a clump of thick-trunked cottonwoods stood a log cabin and a stable of peeled pine logs, a round corral, all on the edge of a few acres of natural meadow enclosed by a pole fence. Robin reined up at the door. His ponies ambled on a few rods and stopped to graze.

He sat half-turned in his saddle, looking about him with a pleased expression.

Ripe grass, yellow in the sun, ran in a rippling wave to the door. Robin had crossed Illinois and Iowa, he had gone more or less hurriedly through the great tier of corn states once or twice in winter. He had never seen wheatfields nor forest nor farmland nor pleasant gardens in midsummer bloom. He knew best the range with its endless miles of grass and sagebrush, peopled sparsely by riders and lonely ranches, grazed by hoofed and horned beasts. He knew the Bear Paws and the Little Rockies and the Sweetgrass Hills, where pine trees grew and wild roses bloomed in thickets under a June sun. The Rocky Mountains were a faint blue wall on the western limit of his journeyings.

He had spent most of his years on the great plains that spread east to the Dakotas and south to Wyoming and Nebraska, where northern bunch grass merged into the arid desert of the southwest.

But Robin had imagination, without which indeed few men functioned long on the range, and he could sometimes see this bit of rich black soil about his cabin blooming with color and tender green of grass and shrubs, a bit of the wilderness taking on the atmosphere of a home where beauty was something more than a casual word.

That was why he had claimed and homesteaded this—a half-mile square of creek bottom—in a day when America had millions of acres to bestow on her sons for the asking. Title to it had been issued Robin only a month since. He had proved up. It was his own. The first definite stirrings of the pride of ownership moved in him now. He didn't see it so much as it was, but as it would be; and Ivy Mayne loomed in the forefront of the picture.

"She'll be a ranch some day," he said to Red Mike. "And we won't have to steal nobody's calves to get up a herd, either."

Then he shook up the red horse, fell in behind the others and stirred them to a jog trot that carried him rapidly across the rolling land under the shoulder of the Bear Paw Mountains, toward the Block S camp.

CHAPTER III

MACHIAVELLI?

FROM the Bar M Bar to Shadow Butte, where the Sutherland riders lay ready to start the fall work, was a matter of three hours' riding. The round-up was camped under the Butte itself on a natural meadow in Little Eagle, a lovely spot ringed about by groves of poplars and clumps of willows, just where the foothills lifted sharply to the timbered slopes of the Bear Paw Mountains.

Robin's string, heads up and ears erect at sight of the saddle bunch scattered on the flat, went downhill on the run. Robin himself drew up on the edge of the high bank to have a look. He had seen round-ups sweeping the plains, trail herds coming up from one horizon and vanishing below another ever since he could remember. Wild horses and wild cattle and wild riding had never grown old, commonplace, to Robin. He always thrilled a little to the sights and sounds of range work. Perhaps because he was and had always been a part of it, dimly conscious of its dramatic significance as the greatest pastoral movement in the history of the world, of himself as a minor figure playing a part in a spectacle bigger than any of its actors.

He had risen in his stirrups many a time on last guard to sniff the morning air, to stare at the sun's brilliant upper segment thrusting above the eastern sky line, shooting yellow fingers across grassland that waved and shimmered like silken crêpe. At such a moment a queer glowing gladness in simply being alive, in being there on the fringe of a sleepy herd with a good horse under him, would give Robin an odd sensation. He got the same feeling when they went thundering down a long ridge, twenty riders abreast, elbows out, reins swinging loose, to the music of jingling bits and spurs, the creak of saddle leather. He had a touch of that strange uplift now, for a moment. An artist with an analytical turn might have defined it

as a dumb response to beauty. Robin didn't attempt to define his feelings. He only knew that when he looked down into Eagle Creek the sight pleased him in a way he could not describe.

The white tents gleamed like snowflakes against the poplar green. The yellow grass spread like a carpet under the feet of two hundred grazing horses, sleek-bodied brutes well broken to range use. Bells on the leaders tinkled as they moved their heads in feeding. The horse wrangler sat on the opposite bank, a lone horseman silhouetted like a statue against the evening sky. Figures moved about the chuck wagon. The smell of coffee and frying beef floated up to Robin's nostrils. In dry, thin air that doubled the range of the human eye over a sea-level atmosphere and lent an uncanny resonance to sounds, the voices of the cowboys had a mellow ring. Some one was singing a ribald trail song. Half a dozen voices joined lustily in the chorus:

"Comin' up the Chisholm Trail
I tell you what you'll get,
A little chunk of bread and a little chunk ofmeat,
Little black coffee with sugar on the sly,
Dust in your throat, boys, and gravel in your eye!"

Robin whooped once, long and loud, and jumped Red Mike down the hill. He loosed his *reata* and slung a noose. Fifty yards short of the wagons he swept like a whirlwind upon the heels of his string, shot the rawhide full length to encircle the head of the horse packing his bed.

Five minutes later his riding gear was stacked under his saddle blanket, and Robin was squatting on his heels by the bed wagon swapping repartee with a dozen riders he knew.

Shortly the cook sounded an alarm. He did not approach these youths where they lounged and say in a softly modulated toné, "Gentlemen, dinner is served." He seized a dishpan, hammered it vigorously with an iron spoon, shouted raucously, "Grub pi-i-ile!" And the crew swooped down on the chuck wagon like a flock of chickens gathering about the mother hen when she clucked discovery of fat worms.

The riders ate. A couple volunteered to help the cook wash

up. The rest withdrew. They sat about the bed wagon, in the bed tent, sprawled on the earth, swapping yarns. They had no cares. Without capital or herds they worked on terms of perfect equality for those who had both in abundance. Their life called for courage, resource, initiative, endurance at divers times and in strange places. Cold, rain, sleet, driving snow, burning sun and buffeting winds, night watches on sleeping herds, rivers in flood, wild horses, lip-cracking thirst allayed by alkali water, days when they rode from sun to sun and slept with their boots on wherever they could lie down—it was all one. They took it as it came. Untrammeled space, action swift and purposeful toward a clearly seen end, work that was always tinged with the excitement of the unexpected, barred monotony from the range. Saving injury, the mishaps incident to what often was necessarily wild riding, the cow-puncher worked or sought diversion in uniformly high spirits. If he had no clear sense of being a unit in Homeric episodes enacted against a spacious and colorful background, he had a rude dignity of his own as well as a sense of humor which frequently took a Rabelaisian twist, so that his phraseology often needed expurgating before it would pass current in polite society. The tales circulating and the cross-fire of talk among the Block S riders need no repeating, since they had no more to do with Robin Tyler than to make him chuckle now and then as he lay on his unrolled bed.

He had at once noted Mark Steele's absence. Later someone remarked that Shining was due to eat a cold supper. Then in the dusk Mark Steele and Tommy Thatcher, a lean Texan, noted for his uncanny skill with a rope, rode in and unsaddled. The cook fed them. Mark remained in the chuck-tent, where, with the privilege of the wagon boss, he slept in comparative privacy. Tommy joined his fellows. "Well, we hit her for Big Sandy in the morning," he announced.

"Heigh-ho," one stretched his arms wide. "Me for the high pillow then. Once we hit Lonesome Prairie us and bed'll be strangers." Which was an oblique way of anticipating days in the saddle and nights on guard while the Block S combed the range for marketable beeves.

In twenty minutes silence fell on the camp. The men were in their blankets. The nighthawk relieved the day wrangler

and moved his horse herd away from about the tents. A moon swam up and Shadow Butte cast a long black cone toward the northwest. Bells tinkled with distant sweetness where the ponies grazed. Midnight passed. When the few hours of darkness began to wane a lantern broke out yellow in the cook tent. As the first paleness showed in the east the cook lifted his call.

In less than an hour, with the sun heaving up above the sky line the outfit was under way, all their equipment, tents, cooking layout, beds, extra ropes and gear piled high and lashed on two wagons drawn by four-horse teams.

There were few trails and those dim ones over that sparsely settled land. One rider acted as pilot across country. In his wake the chuck wagon led the van. Behind this rattled the bed wagon driven by the nighthawk. Behind these came the saddle herd, urged on by the horse wrangler with a trailing rope. Last of all the riders mounted, shook the kinks out of their fractious horses and broke into a gallop. Some passed the *remuda* and the wagons. Some jogged leisurely. They rode as they pleased, in pairs, in clusters, at a walk or a gallop.

Robin found himself riding elbow to elbow with Mark Steele, "Shining" Steele. Appropriate name, apart from the beaten silver ornaments with which he adorned his gear, even to a row of conchos down the outer seam of his leathern chaps, for the man himself was like a steel blade, tall, lithe, thin-faced, a rider born and a cowman from his heels up. Mark Steele had come into the Bear Paws unheralded and unsung, and in two years had become range boss of the Block S over the heads of older hands.

He jogged beside Robin, hat pushed back, swaying to the gait of his horse, humming a little tune, his eyes roving over what spread before them as they topped each little rise.

"Mayne give you a good mount, kid?" he asked presently.

"Thirteen head. And I brought along a ridge runner of my own," Robin answered.

"Uh-huh. You won't be afoot, then, half the time, like you was with the Pool last spring."

Mark said it with a smile but there was a sting in the remark, an implied sneer. Robin had joined the general round-up with the Bear Paw Pool that spring, having only ten horses

in his mount. Of these one had gone crazy with loco weed, another grew lame. He rode the remaining eight to a standstill trying to hold up his end with men far better mounted. It was neither his fault nor Dan Mayne's—just ill luck. Saddle horses had vanished, others had got crippled. There was no time to break colts. But both Robin and the Bar M Bar had lost a modicum of prestige. He didn't thank Steele for reminding him. He knew that with his present string he could take the outside circle and come into camp with the best of the Block S. So he kept silent.

"I was down to Mayne's night before last," Steele observed. "You weren't in sight."

"Hunting horses," Robin explained. He knew Mayne, or Ivy, or both, had told Steele that. What business of Mark's was it, anyway?

"Where'd you ride?" Shining asked quite casually.

"So *that's* it," Robin thought—recalling the dead cows and the rifle shot that put him on the run out of Birch Creek bottom. Aloud he said: "Sand Coulee, Boggy Spring, west side of Chase Hill."

"Much stock in sight?"

"Quite a lot."

They rode two hundred yards in silence. "There's thieves workin' on this range," Shining Mark broke out suddenly.

"The hell you say!" Robin's surprise was not simulated, but it was surprise at information coming to him from this source.

"I been ridin' myself some lately," Mark went on in his crisp tone. "I've seen things."

"What you been drinkin'?" Robin tried raillery.

Steele frowned.

"I seen some pretty fishy lookin' work," he growled. "Pretty raw. There'll be a necktie party when I get it figured out."

"Well, they can't steal no cows of mine," Robin said lightly. "Cause I don't own ary a split hoof. You don't surprise me much. I guess there's no range in Montana, nor any place where cows run, that there isn't somebody packin' a runnin' iron and draggin' the long rope now and then."

"Ain't you seen nothin'—no big calves with a fresh brand and no mother handy?" Steele persisted.

Robin shook his head. "If I'd come across stuff like that any-

where in Bar M Bar territory I guess old Dan Mayne would be ridin' the pinnacles with a Winchester and frothin' at the mouth," he drawled. "What's the brand?"

"I ain't talkin'," Steele said darkly. "An' you keep this to yourself what I say. *Sabe?* They're workin' on the Block S mostly, I expect. But they might not overlook the Bar M Bar. So keep your eyes open, kid, an' let me know if you spot anything that looks queer."

Three or four riders behind broke their horses into a lope, came abreast, laughing, elbows flopping like limp-winged birds. Steele and Robin fell into their pace. In a row, bobbing uniformly, hoofs beating out a steady rhythm on the dry turf, they passed the saddle herd, the wagons. The nighthawk driving the bed wagon popped his whiplash as they went by. The cook, acting Jehu, braced himself by the four-horse reins, a cigarette in his lips. Far ahead of the wagons they overtook and joined the other riders.

At noon they camped two hours on a creek bottom, ate, caught fresh horses and moved on. Mid-afternoon saw the cavalcade top a rise below which, in the middle of a great gray stretch of sagebrush, the town of Big Sandy lifted a huddle of unpainted buildings. There the chuck wagon would take on a month's grub, the cowboys would drink Bourbon whisky and play poker overnight, and at dawn the Block S would depart into the wide waste of Lonesome Prairie, to return again in due time with a herd of prime beef cattle two thousand strong.

And all the way to town Robin wondered what Shining Mark was getting at. Was he craftily seeking to discover if Robin *had* been the rider on the sorrel horse who turned over the dead cow to read her brand?

Or was he shooting straight when he promised a necktie party for cow thieves unknown? When Robin gazed at Steele's easy erectness in the saddle, the flashy ornamentation of his riding rig, he was troubled by a promise of trouble. He was sure, yet not so sure. More than ever he wished he had been able to see what brand went on those calves that day.

Coupled with uncertainty went the firm conviction that if Shining Mark once linked him with a knowledge of those dead cows and stolen calves, he, Robin Tyler, would need eyes in the back of his head whenever he rode alone.

CHAPTER IV

ONE STEP AT A TIME

THE Block S outfit, far into that night, staged a good-natured minor riot in a town whose population of something less than a hundred souls was eighty per cent dependent on Block S activities for its existence. There were half a dozen small ranches within a ten mile radius, men who owned from three to five hundred head of stock. A few sheep-masters with flocks and herders and camp tenders helped put money in circulation there and lent a color—and odor—of their own to the region. Brooklyn-born fiction to the contrary, the cattleman and the sheep owner were not always at each others' throats. The man on horseback tended to look down on the shepherd who guarded his flocks afoot. In all history the man on horseback has done that. But physical clashes between the two groups only occurred when one encroached too arrogantly on what the other deemed his inalienable rights and privileges.

And all these folk lived under the tolerant shadow of Adam Sutherland, whose Block S marked the ribs of thirty thousand cattle. Sutherland owned the town site of Big Sandy. He owned the general store and operated the post office. If he didn't own the hotel and the three saloons and the blacksmith shop it was simply because he didn't care to bother about petty details of commerce. So Big Sandy supported a number of people and activities that were like mistletoe on the parent oak, some ornamental, some possibly useful, but a secondary growth as far as the Block S was concerned.

Sutherland had come into Montana with a beef herd for a military post. He had remained to grow up with the country. He had become big financially. He had been a big man physically. Now that he was no longer young his flesh was becoming a burden. He liked to jog around the home ranch on Little Eagle in the summer, to ride out and watch his men handle stock

when the round-up worked near home. He liked to be in Big Sandy when his beef herds were marshaled into the stockyards in a cloud of dust and see the fat steers go rolling east in trainloads. He liked to see his riders have their fling in town. His rule over all that lay under his ægis was beneficent, almost paternal. Adam Sutherland had never heard of such a thing as an efficiency system, but he had its equivalent at his service, functioning smoothly, ungrudgingly. A vision of the future was a phrase he might not have fully comprehended, but he had that too, or he would not have owned thousands of acres of meadow land, the headwaters of mountain streams, a score of unfenced pastures in a country where grass and water were as yet free to all men, in a period when most cattlemen still believed that the great plains must remain a cow pasture for all time to come. The Sutherland holdings dotted the foothills of the Bear Paws in a semicircle fifty miles south and east.

He sat on the counter in the big store now, and greeted his riders by name as they passed in and out making sundry small purchases. Later in the evening he made the round of the saloons and hotel bar, the Silver Dollar, Monty's Place, the Exchange, bought a round of drinks for "the house" in each place. Then he went away to his house set off on a knoll to one side of the town, a white, sprawling cottage with a green patch of lawn about it, surrounded by a picket fence to keep out the wandering stock that sometimes strayed wide-eyed into the single street of this frontier hamlet. The fence served also the secondary purpose of keeping out over-hilarious cow-punchers who might mistake the place for something else and in high spirits—both literally and figuratively—undertake to ride their horses up the front steps and along the porch, crying a jovial challenge to those within to come out and "whoop 'er up."

Mark Steele's outfit went north into the flat waste of Lonesome Prairie next morning. The Block S cowboys struck town again in something less than three weeks. They had sent a trainload of cattle east from Galata on the high line of the Great Northern. Now they drew up to Big Sandy with a herd of seventeen hundred strong, sleek, fat, long-horned beasts moving like an army without banners but armed with spears that glinted in the sun, the slender wide-curving horns inherited from bulls of Andalusian blood.

The outfit camped where the level of the Prairie pitched down to the sagebrush flats. Robin went on first guard with the lights of Big Sandy glimmering two miles distant and five hundred feet below. East, west, north, Lonesome Prairie spread its night-shrouded breadth, an enormous, uninhabited triangle of grass-land a hundred miles on each side, with a railway crossing its middle and scarcely a dwelling in all those miles except the dull red section houses where the railroad laborers lived.

Robin jogged his two hours and a half, meeting and passing the other rider, around and around the outer edge of a herd that slept as peacefully as a babe in the cradle, a vast amorphous blot on the shrouded plain. They crooned chanty songs as they rode, not because they loved singing well enough to drone interminable ditties for their hours on watch, but because a rider moving silently in the dark might sneeze, flap a slicker, his horse might stumble—and at a strange noise breaking the night silence that herd would jump the bed-ground as one, in a panic, making the earth shake with the thunder of their flight. So they sang, crooned rather. And the relief coming on at eleven o'clock came droning or whistling to the herd.

"All right. You got 'em. See that you keep 'em." Robin and his mate jocularly greeted the relief, and departed.

Robin was paired for night work with Tex Matthews, a middle-aged Texan, a quiet, soft-voiced man whose gentle ways were a serviceable mask for a rider who had seen a good deal of wild west in his time. They turned toward camp. Matthews rode a little way, turned to look into the flat below. In the dark and the silence a night breeze sighed, as if the range breathed audibly. The Texan stared at the town lights. Half the Block S crew had ridden in when first guard was set. Sometime before dawn they would come galloping back.

"They'll be gettin' action down there, I expect," he murmured.

"Let's ride in," Robin suggested. "I don't want to sleep."

They swung their horses about. In fifteen minutes they were dismounting before the Silver Dollar. That particular house was the favorite resort of the Block S. They patronized all saloons without favor, as a rule, but the Silver Dollar was roomy, clean, it had a billiard table and comfortable chairs. More important, it was conducted by a genial soul who, having been a range-rider himself, knew and welcomed cow-punchers regard-

less of whether or not they had money to spend over his bar.

Now Robin and Matthews had neither expectation nor purpose beyond a natural hankering for the glow of bright lights, a drink or two—a little diversion, so to speak. They would ordinarily have found some of the outfit, perhaps have played stud poker an hour or two, taken a stirrup cup and departed.

But once inside the door Robin Tyler had a strange intuition of something in the air. Mark Steele leaned on one end of the bar. Three or four Block S men stood or lounged about. A couple of strangers were present. And slumped in a chair against the farther wall sat Dan Mayne. His chin was sunk on his breast. But he was neither asleep nor in a stupor. Mark Steele regarded him with a smile that was a mixture of contempt and calculation.

"Hello cowboys," Steele greeted the two. "Couldn't resist temptation eh? C'mon. Have a drink. Ho, Dan!"

He called Mayne. "Line up, old-timer. Have a shot."

"I ain't drinkin'," Mayne snarled.

Robin, who had started toward him, and so stood between the two, heard Mayne add a rider to the sentence under his breath—"not with you, damn your soul!"

"No, you don't drink, do you?" Mark laughed unpleasantly. "You just pour it down, that's all. Come on, kid," he spoke to Robin, "line up here. The old man's on the prod, but the rest of us are sociable."

Robin hesitated a moment. There *was* something in the air. There was a subtle shade of the peremptory in that "line up here." The tone nettled him out of all reason. And he didn't like the conjunction of Dan Mayne drunk and resentful in the same room with Shining Mark Steele. "Leave me out this time," he said casually. "Looks like I better put my boss to bed. I generally have to when he goes on a bust."

"Suit yourself," Steele replied tartly. "All the same to me."

That muttered sentence of Mayne's was apparently the last coherent speech he was capable of making. Robin got him out of the chair, steadied his uncertain progress across the way to the hotel and half-carried him up to a bedroom. He sat beside him, and piled a wet towel on Mayne's head. In half an hour the thickness of tongue and brain partially cleared.

"You been squabblin' with Mark tonight?" Robin asked then.

He wanted to know. If Mayne had jumped Steele, he, Robin, would be in a difficult situation, working under Steele.

"Naw, not about *that.*" Mayne understood his meaning at once. "I ain't a damn fool altogether. But I don't like that *hombre.* And I *am* drunk. When I'm drunk I ain't got as much sense as I should have about some things. Ivy's in town with me. Mark he comes ridin' in about supper time and gets her corraled in the parlor an' sets there talkin' the kid black in the face. So I tell him to lay off, that I don't want no flashy, silver-spangled wagon bosses in my family. I wanted to say cow thief instead uh wagon boss, but I didn't. Least I don't think I did."

"You *are* a damn fool," Robin said angrily. "Ivy's a blamed sight abler to stand off Mark Steele than you are. I'm a darned sight more interested in who she talks to than you are, an' I sure wouldn't jump any man for settin' talkin' to her in a hotel parlor. Darn it, he comes to the ranch, and you make him welcome."

"No more," Mayne asserted with drunken emphasis.

After a minute he said thickly:

"I found them dead cows below Cold Spring. I rode a week steady before I located the calves. I found 'em fresh marked. I can't prove nothin'. But I found 'em."

"S-sh," Robin warned. "Not so loud. What brand's on the calves?"

"T Bar S."

"Huh! I've seen a few around." Robin wrinkled his brows. "Little bunch was thrown in on the Block S range a year ago. Supposed to belong to some Helena man."

"Yeah," Mayne snorted. "I looked into that, too. Helena hell! The T Bar S is registered in Jim Bond's name. I've known him a long time. He keeps a two-by-four saloon in Helena. Never owned a cow in his life. Them T Bar S's was throwed in here last year, a hundred and fifty head mixed stock. I bet you Mark Steele put up the money. But I can't prove it. I can't prove nothin'—yet."

"Well, if you can't prove nothing, you can't, that's all," Robin said. "You just got to lay low, and see which way the cat hops."

"I'm goin' to ask old Adam to-morrow if *he's* got any idea what's goin' on around here," Mayne growled. "An' I'm goin' to ride an' watch. Ride an' watch," he repeated darkly.

CHAPTER V

WATCHFUL WAITING

ROBIN rode to camp alone. The Block S riders were all gathered in the Silver Dollar when he came back to where his night horse stood with the others in a row by the hitching rack. Through the windows he could see that a poker game had started. Tex Matthews was playing. Robin didn't want to drink. With his mind fully occupied he somehow didn't care to talk. He was aware of a faint reluctance to facing Mark Steele while Mark was in that hair-trigger mood—a trouble-breeding temper, certainly quickened by a few drinks, that might or might not have been generated by something Mayne had said in his cups.

Steele was not rated a quarrelsome man. He could be arbitrary, high-handed, and he had never been known to give way an inch for anyone. Even his ordinary genial manner could easily take on an edge. He had no known notches on his gun handle. But whatever obscure inner force it is, that makes some men positive, and others negative, in their human contacts, it resided in Mark Steele, and exacted a certain deference among men who were lightning-quick to resent any form of aggression.

So Robin, deep in his own reflections, swung into his saddle and rode away to camp. If Ivy had not been asleep in her room he would have tarried longer. But he would see her to-morrow. He fell asleep, in a bed unrolled on the grass, with his face turned to the stars. He wakened once when the riders came pattering into camp and got quietly into their beds. A cloudless sky brilliant with specks of silver arched over him, a luminous inverted bowl. Crickets chirped in the grass. Night horses tied to the bed wagon, on picket, made their usual noises. The bells on the *remuda* tinkled distantly. Small sounds in a deep hush

overlying a lonely land. Robin turned over and slept again.

At daybreak the outfit mounted. There was a herd to trim. While the bulk of that seventeen hundred bore the Block S there were strays of half a dozen other brands to be shipped, and these cattle were not jammed indiscriminately into cars to be sorted in Chicago. The cattleman unscrambled his own eggs.

From dawn to noon the flat a mile outside the stockyards was a scurry of dust, flying riders, steers and cows being shot out of the main herd into little bunches held separate. Once sorted by brand and sex each group moved into the shipping pens. By four o'clock the last longhorn was on his way, two trainloads of him.

The riders were free until the following morning, when the Block S would pull south. Thirty miles beyond Birch Creek, beyond the Bar M Bar, Steele would throw his riders on circle again to comb the range for beef. The camp would move day by day toward the railroad as the riders gathered a herd.

But now, as the last door clanged shut on the last animal, the cowboys flung themselves on their horses and charged down on the Silver Dollar. For ten hours they had worked in heat and dust. They were hot and thirsty. Cold beer was nectar to their parched mouths.

Robin stayed with the crowd for one round of elbow-crooking. Then he crossed to the hotel. The Maynes were still in town. He sought the store. As he clanked up the steps he passed Dan Mayne and Adam Sutherland perched on the planking, Mayne talking with emphatic motions of his hands and head, Sutherland big, fat, good-natured, placidly listening, chewing on a cigar. Robin nodded and went on in, looking for Ivy. But in that semi-public place he couldn't talk to her nor she to him even if she had not been deep in purchases of dry goods aided and abetted by the blacksmith's wife and the hotelkeeper's daughter. Out of their natural habitat both Robin and Ivy were shy, self-conscious. They exchanged greetings. Robin bought a pound of Bull Durham and took himself off.

Sutherland rose as he came out and ambled away toward his house. Robin sat down beside Mayne. The old man's eyes were slightly reddened. Otherwise he showed no sign of his overnight tussle with John Barleycorn. His mind was still occupied with cows and cow thieves.

"Sutherland don't take no stock in any rustlin'," he complained. "He's so gol darned sure nobody's got the nerve to rustle stock on the Block S range. 'Course I couldn't blat it all. I only told him what I seen myself, an' not all that either. He just laughed. Said if some of my cows got shot it wasn't because somebody was stealin' their calves, but more likely some poison mean galoot had it in for me."

"How'd he figure calves with no mothers and a T Bar S on their ribs?" Robin inquired.

"I didn't go that far." Mayne's normal caution was to the fore, evidently. "I don't want to start nothin' I can't finish. I got to know more before I go hollerin' names and brands."

"I guess that's good policy," Robin agreed. "Still, I don't *sabe* the play. If it was Mark—— Why'd he steal calves for a man in Helena?"

"Bond's probably a stall. Mark's either got an interest in that brand or owns it. Naturally he keeps that dark," Mayne replied sourly. "If them calves had had a Block S on 'em I'd think my chances were slim to make any money in the cow business around here. I thought at first he was workin' on me to make a good showin' for the Block S. I never seen a big cow outfit yet that wouldn't back a wagon boss in anything he did if he could show a good increase from year to year. But when I see that T Bar S I know he's out for himself."

"Maybe it ain't Mark, after all," Robin murmured. 'I'm not dead sure, you know. I went mostly on the flash of silver."

Robin didn't say that he had been confirmed in his first impression largely by Mark's behavior since.

Mayne looked at him peevishly.

"Who'd you think it might be, then?" he inquired. "Or has Mark got you buffaloed so's you dassent think out loud to me? 'S he been puttin' the fear uh God into you? You 'fraid of him?"

"I don't know," Robin answered truthfully. "He's done some pretty high-handed things in this country and made 'em stick, hasn't he? He'd be a bad man to tangle with. He's never made a gun play that I know of. Still, everybody seems to take him for walkin' dynamite."

"He is, too," Mayne agreed moodily. "He looks it, acts it once in a while. I sized him up as dangerous the first time I ever saw

him. Some men are that way. Soon as you look 'em in the eye, you know they'll be poison if you go up against 'em. Same time, nobody, if he was deadly as a Gila monster, is goin' to keep stealin' my stock and get away with it, make me think I like it. I seen plenty wild west before Mark Steele was born. You watch he don't keep cuttin' back unbranded stuff on you when the outfit works south of the mountains, Robin. The time to keep cases on him is all the time. If he drags the long rope on my territory after round-up's over, I bet you I get him before the grass comes up in the spring."

"Suppose you were dead sure, but had no evidence a stock inspector could make an arrest on, what'd you do?" Robin asked curiously.

"More'n one way of killin' a cat besides chokin' it to death with butter," Mayne drawled cryptically.

As the Block S wagons, saddle bunch and riders traveled south the next forenoon they passed one equipage and were themselves passed by another on the trail that ran to the Sutherland ranch on Little Eagle.

The first was Dan Mayne and Ivy rolling home with a team and wagon. Robin jogged beside them for a mile or so bantering Ivy. Then Mark Steele detached himself from the other riders and joined him, and somehow the light-hearted chaffering between Ivy and Robin ceased. Mark did the talking. He was as genial as the sun. Even old Mayne had to grin. But Robin didn't. He kept pace and was casual, but he wasn't happy. And when Mark said: "Well, kid, the outfit's leavin' us behind," Robin lifted his hat and rode on with Steele, in spite of the fact that it was his privilege to join the outfit when he chose. He wasn't a Block S man. He was a "rep." But he went.

Steele tightened up as soon as they were clear of the Maynes. It wasn't anything he said because he didn't open his mouth. It was his manner, a subtle something Robin could feel. Mark looked back at the team and wagon once. Then he looked searchingly at Robin and smiled—without a word. The mocking flicker in his eyes made Robin uneasy. It was not the first time Steele had manifested an interest in Ivy Mayne, although everybody within fifty miles knew she was Robin's girl.

"Maybe," thought Robin, "he thinks he can get her the way he's gettin' the old man's calves."

They joined the other riders. As they paced along the trail some one noticed a little banner of dust far behind.

"Somebody's foggin' it on our track," Tommy Thatcher remarked.

The "somebody" turned out to be Adam Sutherland, in a fancy buggy, holding taut reins over a pair of standard-bred bays kicking the dust out from under them as if they were hitched to a racing sulky.

The buggy passed like a rider at the gallop. Sutherland nodded. The cowboys lifted their hats when they saw a girl in the seat beside Sutherland. The shiny top was up and all they had was a glimpse. But that was sufficient, for some of them.

"May's back, eh?" one commented.

Robin had a flash of a pale face, fair hair, bright blue eyes. He knew about Sutherland's only daughter although he had never seen her until now. She was getting a formal education in the State capital, where Sutherland lived in the winter, and sometimes she came to the home ranch a few weeks in summer. She had been born on Little Eagle when the Block S cattle numbered hundreds instead of thousands. She was good-looking, the cowboys said, and she had been very pleasant to crippled riders laid up at the home ranch, but none of them knew her well. She rode about in the hills a little with her father, and a great deal more alone. The Sutherland riders discussed her freely as the buggy grew small on the trail ahead and disappeared at last over a rise.

"She used to love a good rider," Amby Phillips said reflectively. "So you bronco fighters can have hope. One time she was half-stuck on a kid that broke horses on Little Eagle—about four years ago, if I remember right. I seen her sit on the fence and clap her hands when he topped off a colt that jumped high, wide an' handsome. She used to run around with him a lot. An' one day a bronc went over backward on this kid an' killed him. She went all to pieces over it, they say. She ain't been here much since. You know her, Mark?"

Steele nodded. "Met her two or three times," he drawled. "I was over to the house last night. Nice lookin', all right. Kinda acts as if she was proud as hell about something, though."

Old Tex Matthews snickered audibly and Steele flashed a cold glance at him.

"What you say, Tex?" he inquired with exaggerated politeness.

"I didn't say. But I was thinkin' that if it don't rain soon and soften up this ground I'll have to shoe a couple of horses."

Steele made no comment. There was a funny little quirk about the Texan's mouth when he made that answer, and he looked straight at Shining Mark. For some reason there was a brief silence, and after that there was no more mention of May Sutherland. Presently they stirred up their horses and tore down into a creek bottom where the wagons were to stop for noon.

That night they camped under Shadow Butte again. The following day took them far east of Birch Creek, east of the Bar M Bar. The Little Rockies loomed blue on the horizon beyond the broad reach of the Gros Ventre Reservation. On their first ride they picked up a fair sprinkling of beef cattle and Robin cut a score of Bar M Bars into the day herd to throw back on his home range. After that the routine of each day followed its usual order of saddling at dawn, riding circle, bunching the gathered cattle in a compact mass near the camp while they cut out the prime beef and branded such calves as had been missed on the spring round-up. Each day they moved a few miles back toward Big Sandy, working the range on either side of the wagons as far as they could reach in one ride.

Robin noted a T Bar S here and there. Some of the riders knew a Helena man owned that brand. None of them cared about the question of ownership. They were not owners. There were other brands on the range with absentee owners. Somehow, because a generous honesty was the accepted range standard the calves of such got branded with the mark their mothers bore, and the steers got shipped to market. If no special arrangement was made for looking after such cattle the big outfits looked after them anyhow. It kept the range in order. Unbranded stock at large was a temptation to men anxious to build up a big herd off a shoestring foundation. If a rustler could get away with stuff from a little owner he soon extended his operations to the big outfit. To the big cattleman a cow thief was an affront to his jealous sense of property rights—to the man with only a few head the same thief was a poisonous sneak who took the bread out of his mouth while he slept.

Robin went about with his keen eyes wide open. He saw

nothing suspicious nor did he expect to see such except by chance. For that chance he was always alert. And within a week, when the Block S worked certain ridges east of Birch Creek chance came his way.

He had noted one thing. Invariably when Mark Steele led his riders on circle and scattered them by twos and threes to make a sweeping drive back toward the wagon, he kept Tommy Thatcher with him. That might have been accident or inclination. Every man has his preferences. If Mark preferred Thatcher's company there was no one to gainsay his choice. For whatever reason, Thatcher and Steele were Siamese twins when it came to riding the outside. The old fancy that the T Bar S spelled Thatcher & Steele took hold of Robin's mind. He knew better. The T Bar S was an old brand. It had changed hands many a time. Still the idea lingered with Robin.

On a certain afternoon the riders finished working a gathered herd. Every outfit, on its home range, took the first cut. When they had finished with the round-up the "reps" could ride in to see if anything of theirs had been overlooked.

Steele waved to Robin.

"Look 'em over," he invited. "I cut a couple of your cows with unbranded calves."

Robin had seen that. It was his business to see such things. But he had spotted another cow with a calf well-grown in that milling mass and he knew other men must have seen them also. None of them would mention the fact, unless he asked. A "rep" was supposed to know his business. He turned and twisted in that jumble of moving beasts until he found what he looked for, and cut them into the bunch being held. He knew precisely how many unbranded calves with Mayne mothers were in that cut. While four riders threw the beef into the day herd the rest built a fire, put in the irons. There were perhaps forty calves to be branded. Robin was delegated to run an iron. As each calf came dragging to the fire the roper called the brand of his mother cow. With a dozen men on the job it was soon done.

"'At's all." Thatcher stopped and coiled his rope.

"All right. Turn 'em loose," Steele ordered curtly.

Robin flung himself on his horse and tore after the cattle that were already departing at a trot, running out a noose as he

went. He knew what he was after. He had an extremely tenacious memory for animals.

He spotted his objective, swung his loop, took his turns and came back dragging a red calf full six months old. Fifty yards behind a Bar M Bar cow came bawling a loud protest at the maltreatment of her offspring.

The irons had been drawn, the fire partly kicked apart. But when they saw Robin with his calf an iron went back into the coals.

"Good eye, kid," Steele commented. "They overlooked one on you. Some of these stock hands losin' their eyesight, I guess."

No more was said. The calf ran free, squirming at the smarting mark on his side. But Robin wondered how often that sort of thing happened to Mayne cows in the course of the season's round-up. He couldn't be everywhere. It was not humanly possible for him to see everything. And he nursed the conviction that any Bar M Bar calf overlooked like that would carry a T Bar S before spring.

It was a tough proposition, he said to himself, a hard game. The cards were stacked; the play crooked.

If he could just once get Mark Steele dead to rights! Robin had never fired a shot in anger in his life. But he felt now, at rare moments, that under certain circumstances homicide was not only justifiable but righteous.

CHAPTER VI

EVIDENCE IN THE CASE

AT THE outer end of a long ride, a circle which was carrying them deep into the Bad Lands lining the north side of the Missouri River, Robin found himself riding beside Mark Steele after all the other riders save Tommy Thatcher, Tex Matthews and himself had been turned off. They had fallen into pairs. Thatcher and Matthews jogged fifty yards in the rear.

"You mentioned rustlers one time to me," Robin said guilefully. "I haven't seen no sign of crooked work. Did you dream somebody was draggin' the long rope on the Block S range?"

"If you were awake," Mark retorted, "you might notice that slick-ears is damned scarce in this rough country where there's generally plenty on account of bunches being missed here and there."

"Maybe so," Robin answered. "But I haven't noticed anything that looked like a maverick totin' a strange brand, either."

"Look here." Shining Mark lowered his voice. "What I said to you and what I say now is not for publication. I told you because you work for old Mayne and I reckon he can't afford to have his stock stolen. You can tell old Dan what I said if you like—but you can tell him likewise that if I hear any loose talk about cow thieves there'll be dust flyin' around him. I know what's goin' on. I don't want no rustler tipped off that I'm on his trail. You tell old Mayne to either keep his face closed or stop drinkin' whisky."

"Why don't you tell him yourself," Robin suggested mildly.

"I'm tellin' *you* to tell him," Steele drawled coolly. "You'll see him first, I guess. And that goes for anybody. *Sabe?*"

He shot the last word at Robin as if it were a challenge.

"Don't know as I do, but I hear what you say," Robin answered slowly.

Steele rode along looking sidewise at him now and then. Robin was sensitive to impressions. He felt that this slender and capable range foreman regarded him with suspicion and annoyance, and a touch of contempt. Whether there was more in the back of Mark Steele's mind Robin couldn't say. Mark's words did sound like a threat. Robin suspected Steele meant his message to Dan Mayne to be taken as a threat. It was as if he said, "You fellows keep off my trail or you'll get hurt."

It wouldn't be the first time in the history of the cow business, Robin knew, that a range boss had used his delegated power and freedom of movement to feather his own nest at the expense of other people. Nor would Shining Mark be the first man to grow restive and see red when he found himself in danger.

Robin knew he had to be wary—or blind. Steele was obliquely warning him that he and Dan Mayne had better be blind. But he did not let Steele know that he so understood. He simply said:

"So long as this sight unseen cow thief don't show his mark on anything belonging to the man I work for, I leave him—or them—to you. The Block S can take care of its own."

"You're damned right it can," Steele said tartly, "long as I run it. I don't like cow thieves, myself."

Again that curious repetition, emphasis. Robin had no acquaintance with classic literature, or he might have retorted: "Methinks thou dost protest too much."

As it was he said nothing.

A mile farther Steele pulled up. When the other two came abreast he pointed into a ravine pitching down to a steep-walled canyon.

"You and Tex," he instructed Robin, "drop in here and get across on top of that other bench. Shove everything from there on back to camp. We'll take in the flat at the river and come up the bottom of the canyon."

They parted. When Matthews and Robin reached the high bench across the canyon the other two were near the drop-off into the river, riding fast. Robin reflected that if there were any Bar M Bar cows with unbranded calves in that river flat they would probably stay there. But orders were orders. He couldn't go one place when he had been told to go else-

where. A range boss's word was law on round-up. If a "rep" didn't like it he could cut his string and go home.

Bunches of cattle dotted the long, narrow plateau they had gained. The wild brutes fled before them until the dry soil smoked under their feet. All they had to do was lope and yell now and then. The cattle could only follow that bench north to the round-up ground. Where Tex and Robin crossed the canyon was the only possible crossing in ten miles.

But though Steele had ordered them to work back from there, between them and the river the bench held other cattle.

Tex rested both hands on his saddle horn and looked south. He frowned. A cow-puncher on circle is supposed to get all the cattle in sight except on ground he knows will be swept by other riders. They were both aware of that. Robin didn't need to ask what Tex was thinking.

"He wasn't none too clear, was he, kid?" Tex remarked. "He said to work back. But if one of 'em don't come up behind us there'll be a parcel of stuff missed."

"Let's linger awhile," Robin suggested. "See if one of 'em shows up. They'll be in the river bottom by now."

They got down off their horses, sought the shade of a clump of jack pine. Half an hour passed. Those distant cattle fed undisturbed.

"If they came up the canyon they ought to be abreast of here now." Robin broke a long silence.

"Yep. Let's ride," Tex muttered.

"Which way?"

"Look into the canyon first."

A view of that deep gorge, straight-walled, floored with sage, gave sight of cattle feeding quietly between them and the river.

"No riders in sight," Tex commented. "Maybe they went swimmin'. Reckon we better get those cattle below us on the bench, kid."

"Mark'll bawl us out if one of them does come up behind us," Robin observed. "But I ain't workin' for the Block S. I don't want to miss cattle."

"We ain't supposed to miss cattle," Tex replied. "As a matter of fact I remember now that a man can't ride up on this bench from the river bottom. Steele and Thatcher got to come up the canyon. I was mixed up on that proposition a couple of

years ago on a pack trip down here. Mark knows that too. I guess he forgot."

They turned and rode south. Because to ride down the bench openly would start every hoof running toward the blind cliff overlooking the Big Muddy they sought the farther side and worked along under the brow, out of sight, until they judged they were south of the last bunch. It was rough going on steep sidehills with loose earth crumbling underfoot, gullies to scramble over, thickets of jack pine to scrub their faces with low branches.

They came out on the bench again less than half a mile from the plateau end. Between them and where they had crossed the canyon at least a hundred and fifty cattle showed.

"Shucks, there sure would have been a bunch of stuff missed," Tex grunted.

"Let's take a look into the bottom," Robin said. "Let's look at the old Missouri once more for a change."

"Go look your head off," Matthews said good-naturedly. "I've seen her plenty. I near drowned in her two or three times. She's no beautiful sight I long to see."

"All right. I'll catch you."

Robin headed for the end of the bench on a high run. He wanted to look. He didn't know what he expected to see. He didn't know if there was anything to be seen.

What he did lay eyes on was sufficient to make him whirl his horse back out of sight the moment his eyes peered over the high bank. Then he dismounted, crawled to the rim and lay flat on his stomach, just as he had lain and looked that afternoon on Birch Creek, a deeply interested spectator.

There was a good deal of activity in that lonely bottom. Fairly in the middle of a flat three hundred yards wide and half a mile long Steele and Thatcher had bunched about a hundred head of cattle of all ages. With only two riders to hold them this herd surged first one way then another and the two horsemen kept their mounts on the jump. Yet now and then one or the other managed by a combination of speed and skill to cut off a cow and a calf and turn them toward the blind end of the flat.

Robin watched for half an hour. By that time the job was done. At least thirty cows and calves had been separated from

the herd. Then Steele and Thatcher headed the remnant of mixed stuff into the mouth of the wide canvon.

Robin mounted and sped south to overtake Matthews, who loped along with little bunches of wild cattle streaking out ahead of him. Robin had seen enough. Back in that bottom was a lot of fine material for Steele and Thatcher to work on at their leisure when round-up was over. No riders would sweep that territory for seven months. Those cows and calves would winter in the bottom. They would not see a rider until that precious pair came down to run the T Bar S on the calves. God only knew what would befall the cows. But whatever happened to them, long before spring, cows and calves would be separated, and the fresh brand scars healed. No one would ever question that indelible mark of ownership.

Robin was satisfied up to a certain point. He had an idea how they worked. He knew who they were. No doubt of that remained. He was pretty sure that although there might be Bar M Bars in that throwback, there must be other brands, that in every place where this pair of thieves took the outside circle there would be cows and calves thrown back to be worked on later. Robin felt sure they played no favorites. He wondered what Adam Sutherland would say if he knew. He did not have to wonder how Dan Mayne would take it. Robin wished he had prevailed on Tex to ride with him to that jump-off. He had only his own word, as yet, in spite of what he had seen. So he couldn't talk, even to Tex Matthews, whom he liked and felt he could trust. He could only relate this tale of wonders beheld to Dan Mayne, whom he couldn't trust to keep still.

Still, Robin was sanguine that in time, in not too great a span of time, Steele and Thatcher, with a little secret assistance from himself, would tangle themselves in their own ropes. The stock inspectors would get them, if a necktie party from the Bear Paws didn't get them first.

He rode fast. He wanted to be well ahead of those two driving the canyon. He took the opposite side of the bench from Tex and stirred the running cattle to even greater speed. Matthews spurred up to join him.

"Hey, what's the rush?" he inquired. "What for the Blocker graze? Sutherland wouldn't thank you for meltin' the tallow off'n his steers' ribs thataway."

Robin let that go by. It struck him that he had better stop Tex from casual talking.

"Say, Tex," he put it bluntly. "Don't you let out I rode down where I could look into the river bottom, will you?"

Matthews stared at him for a second. Robin matched his gaze without change of expression. The Texan suddenly shrugged his shoulders.

"I'm deef, dumb an' blind," said he. "What'd we do? Cross the canyon, see a few head behind us, a little back, an' get 'em?"

"Yes, if anybody asks," Robin agreed.

"Guess maybe we *had* better run a little fat off these steers," Tex drawled, "else we sure will have Mark inquirin' where in hell we were at. An' you don't want him gettin' curious? Eh?"

"You're gettin' curious?"

The Texan shook his head.

"I been on many a cow range since I quit the Rio Grande," said he. "An' on some of 'em I learned not to be curious. It's a wise cow-hand that knows enough to keep his mouth shut. The flies don't get in."

"Blow flies," Robin muttered.

Tex laughed.

"You're a bright kid," he said teasingly. "Let's push these cows on an' talk about the weather."

They hazed the cattle up the bench, between those gaudy canyons, torn out of the plains level as if by some Gargantuan plow. Robin loped over to the rim of the canyon once for a look down. Cattle were running. He could see the glint and flash of shining horns. Far back a haze of dust showed where Steele and Thatcher were punching up the drag. Robin felt easier. He and Tex were well ahead of that thieving pair. Mark would not be suspicious of spying from above.

Nearly an hour after they threw their cattle on the round-up ground Steele and Thatcher came in with a couple of hundred head. They were the last drive. Their horses were rough with sweat, tired. When they rode into camp to catch fresh mounts to work the herd Mark commented on their ride. To Robin it seemed like overdoing the thing.

"Ten miles for nothing," Mark observed to him casually. "There was a lot of stuff in the canyon, but hardly a dozen head in the river bottom."

CHAPTER VII

A RIDER AND A LADY

WHEN the Block S hauled in to a camp ground midway between the Bar M Bar and the Sutherland ranch its beef herd numbered close on two thousand head. They were pulling for the railroad. With that herd off their hands one more sweeping of the range between Mayne's and Big Sandy would end the fall round-up.

Robin came off day herd at four thirty of a September afternoon. He was through for the day. He had no guard to stand that night. But when the wrangler bunched the *remuda* in the rope corral strung from the wheels of the bed wagon, he caught a horse just the same.

Steele looked at him inquiringly. Robin half expected him to ask the why of a horse. A cow-puncher free of appointed duty came and went as he pleased, giving no account of his movements unless he chose. A "rep" had even wider latitude.

It would not in the least have surprised Robin if Steele had overstepped a range boss's privilege in regard to his movements. Each day in subtle, silent ways, Shining Mark evinced more of a tendency to "ride" him, and Robin couldn't get away from the idea that Mark was slowly but deliberately working up to a point where the Bear Paws would not be big enough to hold them both. There was a definite limit to what a man could stand. To keep his peace, avoid friction, until Mark crowded him too hard was the only course Robin could see to pursue.

With a little more than two hours' daylight ahead of him he pointed for the Bar M Bar. Whether Steele showed his teeth or not Robin would be true to his salt. If Shining Mark had been thundering on his trail to start a private war Robin would still have ridden home that night to tell Mayne he had better ride those river bottoms and get his calves before Steele and Thatcher got around to them.

Mayne would fume, but he would save his stock—unless there were other rustlers in league with Steele. Robin didn't think that likely. Steele was a lone wolf, not a gangster. That was his clearest impression of the man; that Mark stood on his own feet, played his own hand strictly for his own benefit. If Thatcher was in with him it was simply because Steele could use Thatcher to advantage. Somehow, Robin gave little thought to this Texan confederate of Steele's. In that he made a slight mistake for which he paid later.

He had ten miles to make. As he rode the faint uneasiness that afflicted him most of the time around the Block S, a feeling born of the conviction that Mark Steele would make some break when he least expected it, fell away from Robin. The cool evening air was pleasant on his face. He stood in his stirrups and chanted the interminable rhymed history of Sam Bass, who was born in Indiana but who roamed unto Texas a cowboy for to be. Robin was happy. His lusty young voice kept time to the beat of his horse's hoofs. He was going to see Ivy for an hour or so. Sufficient unto the day——

In a coulee he jumped a bunch of wild horses. As they broke away and tore up the opposite slope Robin spotted among them the gray cow horse he had left a cripple by Cold Spring. In his own round-up mount one horse had gone sore-footed, another had a cinch sore. Robin could not only use another horse but he foresaw tall riding for Dan Mayne, and the gray would be useful. So he fell in behind the broom tails. He had all night to get back. A few miles more or less didn't matter.

He was well mounted but he couldn't quite head the wild bunch. They raced away northwest from the Bar M Bar and toward the Sutherland ranch as if the devil was on their heels. On the plains as well as the sea a stern chase is sometimes a long one. But after half an hour of headlong galloping he drew up on them. Whereupon the long-tailed mares gave up their frantic effort to get out of the country and settled to a docile trot, permitting themselves to be driven at will. Robin promptly hazed them into a wild-horse corral standing lonely in the creek bottom and there roped the gray.

By some kink in his equine make-up the gray had never become properly halter broken. He would not lead as a sensible cow horse should. His progress at a rope's end was a series of

stubborn leg-stiffenings. Robin knew his game. You didn't lead the gray; you towed him. So Robin saddled him for riding. His other horse would lead at any pace by a grocery cord.

Now the gray had fattened and grown high-spirited with weeks of freedom. Something of the wild always lurked in the cow horse until his heart was broken or his legs grew stiff. Robin knew that for about one minute and a half he would have to ride. The gray was a powerful beast, active, deep-chested, hot-blooded. He would sink his head the moment Robin's leg crossed his back. Once convinced that he couldn't buck off his rider he would be gentle as a lamb.

So Robin tied his sweaty horse to a post and turned loose the broom tails. They left for parts unknown in a cloud of dust. The gray, walking stiff-legged, a decided hump in his back, snorting protest against the tight cinch, he led outside.

When Robin topped off a snaky one he liked room; he didn't like his legs being banged against corral posts. About this corral there lay a flat made to order for bronco busting. It ran level as a lawn for a couple of hundred yards, brown springy turf on which a plunging horse could keep his feet. Robin Tyler could ride any horse that ever lived so long as the brute would stay right side up.

He had no special technique, except to get in the saddle and stay there. He doubled the gray's head back toward his shoulder, put his foot gently in the stirrup, took firm hold of the horn.

The moment his weight came on horn and stirrup the gray went in the air—and Robin went with him. The leather leg of his *chaparejos* smacked against the fender on the off side. His boot went home in the stirrup. He whooped once, long and loud, in sheer exultation at the plunge and shock and twist. The gray wasn't mean. But he could and did pitch high and hard and fast. The whirl of his contortions took him across the flat with little pieces of sod torn loose and flung aside by his hoofs.

Robin rode him straight up as he rode them all. He never admitted it, but he never failed to get a decided thrill out of such a set-to. Not once did the gray show daylight between Robin and his saddle. He held his reins in one hand. With the other he snatched the soft gray Stetson off his head so that the sun made glints on his brown wavy hair while he fanned the gray and taunted him and laughed out loud without quite knowing why

he laughed when the horse made his last high, stiff-legged plunge and brought up, breathing hard, rattling the bit in his mouth within a few feet of a clump of quaking aspen that stood on the bank of the creek.

"Go to it, Stormy," Robin encouraged. "If it amuses you, I don't mind. If you got any more in your system let's have it out. Then we'll go home."

The gray's head was up, his ears erect. Robin touched him lightly with the spurs. Stormy took a step or two. He had got it out of his system, so to speak, and had another matter on his mind for the moment.

When Robin's gaze quite naturally lifted to what attracted the horse he perceived that all unknown he had an audience.

A girl sat on a chestnut horse within thirty feet of him, drawn up against the aspens. She was bareheaded. Her hair was yellow, like ripe corn, very short, almost as short as Robin's. It curled all over her head in little spirals. She had on a white blouse, a flaming orange scarf encircled her white throat, her skirt was divided and of gray corduroy. Her tan riding-boots were armed with a pair of silver spurs that flashed in the sun and reminded Robin disagreeably of Mark Steele. She had big, clear, very dark blue eyes that rested on Robin with a friendly light in them.

All these details Robin noted in a breath. His hat was still in his hand. He sat erect in his saddle, staring in sheer astonishment. He wasn't used to apparitions like that. They were rare indeed on the range. He felt thankful that the whimsicalities he had shouted at Stormy, the gray horse, in that wild progress across the flat had not been expressed in the ribald idioms of the cow camps.

"Howdy," he said politely.

The girl smiled and stepped her horse forward.

"Are you practicing to join Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show?" she asked.

Robin grinned.

"Not that you could notice," said he, cheerfully. "Just ridin', that's all."

"You seem to enjoy it," she observed.

"Well, if a cow horse tries to throw me and can't do it, it don't make me sad," Robin admitted.

The gray woke up. He plunged twice, swapped ends once in

the air, stopped as unexpectedly as he began, and stood fretfully shaking his head. Robin laughed. No horse ever caught him off guard. The gray sidestepped, turned so that he exposed the brand on his shoulder.

"Oh. You ride for Dan Mayne, do you?" the girl said. "I'm May Sutherland."

"Robin Tyler's my name," he exchanged the courtesy. He was not surprised. He had surmised at first glance that this was Adam Sutherland's daughter.

"So you're just riding," she continued in a friendly tone. "I do that myself sometimes—just ride. I thought cow-punchers always rode for a purpose, not just for fun. You certainly *can* ride."

May Sutherland's voice was a rather wonderful thing, it suddenly dawned upon Robin—and not because she praised his horsemanship. From that slender figure, pliant as a willow, a man somehow expected to hear a sweet, shrill tone, like a canary twittering. May's voice was not so much deep, as throaty, liquid. It was like a caress. It stirred Robin curiously. There rose beside this very fair, frank-speaking daughter of a cattle king the image of Ivy Mayne. They were a direct contrast, in looks, manner, speech, in everything—and both alluring. If a man had to choose between them? That vagrant thought startled Robin. Indeed impressions flashed through his mind with such speed that those queer speculations were come and gone without his losing the point of her words or hesitating for an answer. He was reminded by her words that he had a very definite purpose in riding that evening.

"I guess a man generally has something on his mind, even when he rides for fun," Robin told her.

He explained briefly why he was riding the gray horse in the cool of evening, all by himself in that lonely bottom, and where he was bound. They rode back to the corral. Stormy was docile now, a very model of high-spirited gentleness. Robin took the lead rope of his other pony. They crossed the creek and rode up on the opposite bank and the range opened before them. The Sutherland ranch lay in a hollow of the hills, masked by pine timber. The Bar M Bar was seven miles south, nestled in Little Birch. Robin could see the contour of the rolling ground behind his own place.

Away on the farther edge of the westward plains the sun dipped below the horizon. The Bear Paws loomed over them on the north, a cluster of high peaks notching the skyline like the teeth of a huge saw. The canyons between the mountains were filled with a pearly tinge slowly turning into the first night shadows. All about them a great stillness in which crickets chirped—over them a sapphire sky with streaks of red and touches of pale gold in the west.

"Which way you riding?" Robin asked.

"I'm not riding. I'm looking," May said in a low absent tone. "Look!"

She waved a gloved hand in a gesture that swept half the horizon. Robin looked. He saw far off the dark line of the Missouri, flanked by the crisscross gashes of the Bad Lands. He saw far beyond the river the Moccasin Mountains, the Snowies, the Belts, pale bluish dabs like so many mirages. He didn't look for anything in particular. He didn't expect to see anything of sensational import such as a stampeding herd, or vigilantes pursuing train robbers, or cloud-bursts flooding low ground nor indeed any of the high lights which in other times and places are presumed to be shed almost continuously upon the cattle country. Robin was not obtuse. He had a dim comprehension of what the girl meant when she said "Look!" in that low, tense voice. Robin himself often paused on high ground to look away into those noble spaces—to wonder——

May looked inquiringly at Robin now.

"What do you see away off there?" she asked.

"Room. Lots of room. Room to move around without knockin' your elbows against somebody or something you don't happen to like. And it's pretty—no, that ain't the right word. You know what I mean, though, I guess," Robin finished lamely. "I like lots of room, myself."

"Yes, I know what you mean." She rested her hand on the saddle horn before her and her tone was reflective. "I just wondered if you saw it, or felt it without seeing it. Space and freedom! Freedom without stint and space without limit," she murmured more to herself than to the cow-puncher beside her. "I wish I were a poet."

She lifted her eyes again to Robin with that slow, faint, friendly smile.

"Yes," she said, "I wondered if you recognized loveliness when you saw it, or if all this great country only means to you grass and water for cows. Free pasture. A chance to make money."

"Cows," Robin affirmed, "is part of the game. Nobody could live on just scenery. But I guess I'd like to look off across the prairie when the sun's shining on it anyhow. It'd be just as good to look at if there wasn't a cow in Montana. Only if there was no cattle here, we wouldn't be here to look."

"That's true, of course," May admitted. "I wonder if cow-punchers generally have that feeling about this country they go galloping over?"

"Some of 'em," Robin hazarded. "Lots don't. I've seen a college cow-hand or two that made up poetry about the range. Most of us haven't got the education to say or write what we think. We just whoop when we feel good over anything and let it go at that. People from the East reckon we're part human, anyway."

"I'm not from the East," May laughed. "I was born here, within sight of where we sit. And if my father hadn't made a lot of money in cattle I'd probably be like the cowboys—whoop when I felt good, without knowing why. As it is——"

She stopped abruptly.

Robin turned sidewise in his saddle.

"I expect," said he, "you're crammed full of education. You've read all the books in the world. You can talk like a professor. And play the piano to beat the band. You'll marry a French count or an English lord and live in a castle, and wear silk dresses all the time."

May rocked in her saddle.

"You're funny, Robin Tyler," she chuckled. "Is that your idea of the proper setting for a cattleman's daughter?"

"Well, if she's got thirty thousand cattle behind her I guess the sky's the limit," Robin answered dryly.

"Possibly. Thirty thousand cattle is the important thing—in men's eyes."

There was something in her tone that made Robin momentarily uncomfortable. May sat staring off across the rolling land.

"If you have to go to the Bar M Bar, then back to the round-up," she said at last, "you'll be riding half the night."

"That don't worry me," Robin returned. "But I reckon you want to get home before dark, so I'll drift."

"I don't particularly care whether I get home before dark or not," she answered. "I don't have to stand guard or go on day herd to-morrow. Don't you sleep now and then?"

"I can sleep when there's nothin' else to do," Robin told her. "I wouldn't waste time sleepin' if I could sit on a pinnacle and talk to you."

"Do you like to talk to me?" she inquired demurely.

"Sure."

"Why?"

The point-blank question, half-amused, half-serious, stumped Robin. He had more or less impulsively uttered the truth as it stirred in him at the moment. The "why" he couldn't answer, except haltingly. But he did his best.

"I don't know, unless it's because you seem a heap different from any girl I ever came across," he replied honestly.

"Are you sure of that?" May inquired smilingly. "I'm white and past twenty-one. I've got hands and feet, a nose and mouth and hair just like other girls. Where's the difference?"

But Robin grew wary of pursuing that inquiry. He was afraid of getting out of his depth, not too sure she wasn't poking fun at him. Girls did that, he knew. He took refuge in the obvious.

"Your hair's sure different," he grinned.

"It is right now," May admitted calmly. She ran her fingers through the tangle of short yellow curls. "But it won't be by and by—when it grows again. I was ill. The fever made it come out. It's a good cure for vanity to be bald as an egg, even if only for a little while. Let's ride the way you're going for awhile—toward the Bar M Bar."

Their horses struck a running walk, that untiring gait of the cow horse trained to cover ground with the least effort. As they rode May and Robin talked, until on a low ridge with twilight drawing in the girl pulled up and held out her hand.

"Good-by, Robin Tyler," she said. "I wonder when we'll meet again."

"Lord knows," Robin answered frankly. "If I had nothing to do but sit on a fat horse and let my feet hang down you might see more than you wanted to see of me. But I'm with the round-up until beef-gatherin's done. By that time you'll be gone."

"No," May said. "I'm not going any more for awhile, except when dad goes to Helena or south for the winter. I'm through school."

"Got your diploma and everything?"

"Yes. Although I don't know what good it's going to do me. If I'd been a boy I'd be on round-up now, myself."

"Tell me," she asked, as if an afterthought had come, "you know Mark Steele pretty well, don't you?"

"No." There was an unavoidable crispness in Robin's tone. "I've seen him off and on the last three years. I never worked with him till this fall."

"You don't like him, do you?" she observed. Her blue eyes burrowed into Robin's.

"I guess I like him as well as he likes me," Robin said slowly. He didn't want to talk about Mark Steele.

"I don't like him either," May murmured. "I wouldn't trust him as far as I could throw him. Yet my father thinks he's the only thing that ever happened around the Block S."

Robin sat silent. He could discuss Shining Mark to a limited extent with Ivy, freely with old man Mayne—somehow, not with this girl.

"I hate the man," she said sharply. "You won't repeat what I say?"

"You know I won't—or you wouldn't say it to me," Robin told her bluntly. "If you hate him it's because you're afraid of him."

May looked down at the ground for a second. She lifted her eyes again to Robin thoughtfully.

"I wonder if that's it? It didn't occur to me. I have no reason to be afraid of him. But I find myself wanting to avoid him although I've only met him three or four times. I rode away from home this evening because my father expected him at the ranch."

"I know men in the Bear Paws that walk away around Mark Steele," Robin said. "And some that step easy where he is. Some just naturally don't like him. Most everybody figures he's a bad man to cross. I guess he knows that, an' it makes him think quite a heap of himself. I don't know."

"What do you think of him yourself?" she persisted.

"I ain't sayin' out loud." Robin shrugged his shoulders.

"That's wisdom. Probably it's just as well not to waste either words or thought on Shining Mark Steele. He's rather gaudily picturesque, with all those silver ornaments on him, isn't he?" she laughed. "Like a stage cowboy—only he's real. By the way, there's to be a dance at the schoolhouse above our place next week. One of the Davis girls told me it was to be timed so our cowpunchers could take it in when the whole outfit got back after shipping this herd. Will you be there?"

"If there's a dance I can get to I'm generally there. Don't reckon you will be, though."

"I might. I'm no snob."

"I have a sort of idea what that is," Robin confessed. "But I'm not dead sure."

"A snob is one who looks down on persons he deems of less consequence than himself, and fawns on those he regards as his superiors, either mentally, socially or financially."

"I've seen such."

"I don't know of any in the Sutherland family, thank God," May breathed.

"You can sure sling the English language," Robin said with a note of admiration in his voice. "Must be a comfort to know all the words there is to say what you want, what you mean."

"Sometimes it is," May agreed. "But I imagine things can be said and pretty well said, and things done, too, without a great many words."

"Oh, sure," Robin admitted cheerfully. "Education's all right. I got enough school into my system to show me that. But it won't do no work by itself. There was a fellow named Sears in the Black Hills where I was raised. He was a college man. Talked three languages. I've seen him keep a whole cow outfit quiet for an hour listening to him when he got tellin' about things he'd seen and read and knew about. He should have been writin' stories for the magazines. Well, his old man who was pretty well heeled somewhere east finally died an' left Sears thirty thousand dollars. First thing he ups and gets married. Then he got him a ranch and about a thousand cattle for a starter. In four years he was broke and his wife run away with a bronco buster from Miles City. Last I heard of Sears he was punchin' cows for the L7 on the lower Yellowstone."

"Does that illustrate the perils of education?" May chuckled.

"Uh-uh. Not to me. Only that education don't give you a cinch. If you got brains and half a chance you can get an education. If you only got a twice-by-two skypiece all the schoolin' in the world won't land you on top of the heap."

"I wonder which crowd I belong to," May reflected.

"Oh, shucks, I wasn't aimin' at you," Robin protested.

"I know you weren't," she smiled. "Well, maybe we'll continue the discussion at that dance. Good-night."

This time she was gone, galloping into the twilight. Robin sat looking after her, listening to the *rat-a-pat* of her horse's hoofs until both sound and rider were swallowed in the dark.

Then he let Stormy have his head and in half an hour was dismounting at the Bar M Bar. Lights shone in the windows. Old Mayne came to the door. Ivy peered over his shoulder, smiling welcome when the lamplight showed Robin's face.

"I guess I'll put these nags in the stable for awhile," Robin said, and Mayne brought a lantern.

Sitting on the hewed timber doorsill of the stable once the horses were munching hay, Robin told his boss bluntly just what he had seen and what he surmised.

Mayne cursed in impotent fury.

"But it might be worse," he took heart after a bit. "We're gettin' onto him. I'll ride them bottoms. You bet I will. I'll have to get hold of another cow hand until you're through round-up, I guess."

"Be careful who you get and what you tell him," Robin warned. "Steele suspicions me now. He don't make no breaks but I know he's thinkin'."

"I wish it was ten years back." Mayne's anger rose again. "I'd ride to the Block S an' shoot that dirty thief like I would a mad dog. But the country's got so God damned civilized you can't even kill a thief unless he pulls a gun on you first. They'd bury me in Deer Lodge for life. Adam Sutherland'd never let up. He'd spend a barrel of money to convict a man that shot that pet snake of his. Don't you let him provoke you, Robin. If he thinks you know too much he'll pick a row with you an' make you start somethin'. Then he'll put your light out an' it'll be a clear case of self-defense for him. Or he'll make you quit the country."

Robin didn't need Mayne to tell him these things. It was

only putting in plain English just what had been gathering in his own mind—just what he felt to be the secret thought Steele nursed. So he didn't discuss that phase of it at all. He had said his say, had done his duty. He rose.

"I'm goin' to see Ivy," he told Mayne. "Then I guess I'll split the breeze."

An hour later he was loping steadily through the night, Ivy's farewell kiss on his lips, but with his mind strangely divided between his sweetheart and May Sutherland.

May was beautiful and so was Ivy Mayne, each in her own fashion. But May's liquid, throaty voice lingered like an echo of faint music in Robin's ears. Robin was unread in the nuances of feeling but no man can escape the subtle thing called charm. May was so utterly free from archness, little coquetries. She was so honest and direct. If she had challenged something dormant in him with all the weapons of her sex, it was unconscious challenge.

Spaces and freedom! Robin looked up at the stars and wondered how she would have described that luminous, silver-spangled sky, what feelings would have moved her and what she would have said if she had been riding knee to knee with him across those rolling plains, guided by the Big Dipper and an instinctive sense of location. He knew quite well what Ivy would say, but what she would feel he doubted if she would know herself, because Ivy was a curiously dumb soul. Expression was strangled in her. She could only act, and act often with the driving impulse terribly obscured. In all their companionship Robin had been compelled to gauge Ivy's deepest thoughts and feelings by outward manifestation alone.

It seemed to Robin a wonderful thing to meet a girl who could talk in clear simple words about what she thought and felt about such puzzling sensations as came over a man when he looked at the vastness and wonder and mystery of the world he lived in. That quality of wonder, of space and time in which man danced his little turn and danced no more, in which there seemed much disorder but in which there seemed also a Law and a Pattern and a Purpose if a man could only discover what it was, had troubled Robin for a long time.

She had been glad to sit there on her horse talking to him, to ride with him a few miles when she could just as well have

ridden the other way. Robin knew that May wanted to see him again. She wanted him to come to that dance. There was no conceit in that certainty. He felt it. And he was troubled just a little. He wasn't sure it would be wise for him. His future, the immediate future which should logically extend into the remote, was linked close with Ivy Mayne's, and as he rode toward the Block S Robin did not dream of it being otherwise, did not even harbor the secret wish that it should be otherwise. He could admire anything that was lovely without any sense of being fickle or faithless. But he did have a faint apprehension that it would not be well for any of them if he should admire May Sutherland too long or at too close range.

Still, Robin had his due share of masculine curiosity along with other male virtues and he did wonder why May seemed to like him. Since most of the mental experience of his life had been objective rather than introspective or analytical, it didn't occur to Robin that neither wealth nor education nor a considerable knowledge of the world beyond the cow ranges made any great difference to a woman's feelings as regards a man—not if that man was young, straight as an arrow, as blithe as Pan on a holiday and rode like a centaur for sheer joy of motion. Nor did Robin know that both men and women liked him for qualities it would have taken a May Sutherland fresh from a university to grasp and define. He only knew that people did like him, trusted him—he had never felt the venom of ill feeling until he came up against Mark Steele. Robin had gone joyously up and down the length of three states without ever drawing a gun or striking a blow in anger. He had seen both happen. He had never been so involved. Trouble had always passed him by until now.

Well, men did go wrong, and the up-and-coming kind like Mark Steele went to hell with bells on when they did go wrong. He would have to be careful. And if trouble came he would have to cope with it as best he could.

That was the philosophic reflection Robin took to bed with him in the Block S camp somewhere near midnight.

CHAPTER VIII

"ON WITH THE DANCE"

WITHOUT incident the Block S trailed its bulky herd across the rolling country between Eagle Creek and Big Sandy. Late September was on the land. The days were still and warm, the air full of a tenuous haze. When the riders went on guard there was a sharp coolness in the night wind, a harbinger of other nights to come when they would grumble and wipe the hoar frost from the seats of their saddles before mounting.

But as yet summer held on. The grass waved yellow where it grew tall in the foothills, curled like a brown mat on the wide reach of the plains. Out of these unfenced pastures the Montana beef herds went to market daily in their tens of thousands from a score of shipping points, rolling east to feed a multitude in urban centers and to fatten the bank accounts of the cattle barons. To this stream of outgoing stock the Block S added its quota on a bright autumn day, a week after Robin rode in the twilight with May Sutherland.

They did not tarry in town. There was a rising market in Chicago and it was a season of prime beef on the range. Twenty-four hours after the last steer clicked his polished horns against the walls of a slatted car the Block S pitched camp at sundown on Little Eagle, two miles below the Sutherland ranch. The cowboys were going to a dance. It was not to interfere with their work. They would dance instead of sleeping, that was all. A few hours sleep more or less——

Robin didn't wait to eat supper. When the last tent stake was driven he mounted and bore away for home, a matter of ten miles. Twelve miles from Mayne's to the schoolhouse. He would ride that twenty-two miles, dance all night, take Ivy three miles above the schoolhouse to a neighbor's where she could sleep till noon and ride home at her leisure. He, himself,

would get to the round-up in time to swallow a cup of coffee, catch a fresh horse and ride again. And he would enjoy every minute of it. So would Ivy Mayne. Music and a smooth floor. They both loved dancing. A dance in the summer was rare. There was always the important seasonal work of the range in summer. Winter was the time for play. Robin would not have missed that night's fun for a month's pay. And Ivy would never forgive him if he let her miss it. She wouldn't go with any other man, it wasn't the thing in the cow country for nice girls to attend dances unescorted. So Robin rode his best horse, Red Mike, and whistled as he burned up the miles.

A little after nine o'clock he was helping Ivy off her horse. Other saddle ponies, a score of them, were hitched to the rail fence that kept wild cattle out of the schoolhouse yard. Buggies and spring wagons loomed in the darkness. Light shone in the yellow squares from the windows. No one could ever accuse range folk of taking their pleasures sadly. Within rose a cheerful clatter of voices, laughter, the tuneful blend of a fiddle and a piano, the slither of feet on a floor made smooth by candle-scrapings.

They hurried in.

While Ivy went into a sort of side room to change her riding boots for a pair of slippers carried in her hand, Robin stood in a short entryway, looking in. As a practiced cowman sweeps a bunch of stock and at a single glance notes marks and brands, so he took in the different faces, most of which he knew —the Davis girls, from the ranch nearby where Ivy's small brother and sister lived while they attended school, the whole Santerre family from Sand Creek, a sprinkling of small cowmen and ranchers from within a radius of twenty miles, even a contingent from Big Sandy.

Over in one corner, bulking large, his big face rosy like a rising sun sat Adam Sutherland, one leg crossed over the other, conversing with another man. Down at the far end Robin marked two couples just a little different, very subtly, indefinably so, from the general run of the crowd gathered for this merry-making. Of the quartette Robin knew one—Sutherland's girl. The other three, two young men and a girl of twenty, he had never seen before. They were waltzing. As they came down the length of the floor May saw Robin in the doorway. She

smiled, nodded over her partner's shoulder. Just abreast of him the music ceased. May turned to him.

"Hello, Robin Tyler."

"Howdy, Miss Sutherland."

"Let me introduce you—Mr. Stevens, Mr. Tyler."

Robin took a second look at young Stevens.

"You happen to be connected with the Long S down in the Larb Hills country?" he inquired.

"Well, sort of," young Stevens grinned. "My father's outfit. You know anybody with the Long S?"

"Oh, I expect I know some of your men," Robin said. "But I wasn't thinkin' of that. It just struck me that it's kind of funny to come across you. Bob Terry is a cousin of mine."

"The dickens he is! Then we're kin by marriage. You're a Texan too, then?"

Robin shook his head.

"My father was. I was born in the Black Hills; grew up there."

"Wonder you never showed up round the Long S." Stevens gazed at him. "Or are you on your own here?"

"Uh-uh. Punchin' cows. I was with Bob one season over on the Big Dry."

"You know my sister, then?"

"Oh sure. Liked her a heap, too."

Young Stevens smiled at May and Robin impartially.

"You've heard about Bob Terry chasing all the way from the Panhandle to kill young Joe Stevens, haven't you?"

May laughed.

"Certainly. I was a little girl here when it happened. Is there anyone on the range in Montana who hasn't heard that story about Bob Terry and young Joe Stevens? And Mr. Tyler is Bob Terry's cousin, eh? Since Joe is your sister, what 'in-law' relation does that make you two?"

"Give it up."

"Too complicated," Robin murmured. "I'd have to go to school some more to figure that out."

"As usual," May changed the subject, "there aren't enough girls to go around. Did you bring one?"

"Yes. She's getting organized," Robin answered.

He looked around. Ivy stood just inside the door of the little

side room looking at him. He beckoned. She didn't move, except to lift her hands and finger her hair with deft little patting touches. The handclapping brought an encore from the fiddler and the coatless pianist who pawed the ivory with gay abandon even if his technique left something to be desired. Stevens and May went on with their dance. Robin joined Ivy where she stood. He was impatient to get his feet on that smooth floor.

"Who was that towhead you were talkin' to?" she asked—it seemed to Robin a trifle resentfully. That amused him, perhaps even flattered his vanity a trifle. He had known Ivy to be jealous before on slight grounds, or none at all.

"Oh, that's Adam Sutherland's girl," he said carelessly. "Come on. Let's dance."

"I never knew you knew her," Ivy said.

"I met her once. What's the odds?"

They moved out on the floor. Mark Steele passed them with the schoolma'am clasped in his manly arms. The school-teacher was very good-looking, a vivacious person with a mass of dark auburn hair and gray eyes and Mark was supposed to like her rather well. He smiled and spoke to Ivy over his partner's shoulder and Ivy bestowed on Mark her sweetest smile and a pert reply.

Robin looked down at her. Her dark head didn't come more than halfway up his breast, so he couldn't see her eyes. But he felt a strange stiffness in her attitude, a resentment. Robin had a faculty of gauging Ivy's moods without a word from her. Almost at once the anticipated pleasure of the evening began to wane. Ivy was sore because he knew May Sutherland well enough to speak to her. She would go out of her way to make him feel her displeasure. She would want to hurt him, and she would be extremely nice to Mark Steele, or some other man, just to spite him. More than likely she would choose to use Steele as a foil. With what Robin knew of Mark's raiding Mayne's stock and Mark's attitude toward himself Robin foresaw some unpleasant moments ahead. For a fleeting instant he wished he hadn't come. Then he felt ashamed of himself for such a weakness, annoyed at anticipation of trouble and a wish to avoid it. Time enough to worry when trouble lifted its ugly head.

"Floor's good," he remarked to Ivy. "I feel like I had wings on."

"Yes," she drawled with a rising inflection. "Look out you don't fly too high."

"Wha's a molla, hon?" he wheedled. "You're not goin' to have a grouch about nothin', are you?"

Ivy looked up at him. It happened that at that precise instant Robin's gaze was on May and her partner. Ivy's dark eyes glowed.

"I will if you dance with that stuck-up thing," she whispered tensely. "Promise me you won't."

"Ivy," he protested. "What the dickens has got into you all at once?"

"She thinks she's so darned smart," Ivy muttered.

Robin had fully intended to dance with May Sutherland because dancing with her would afford the only opportunity they would have to talk and he had scarcely realized how eager he was to talk to May Sutherland until Ivy began taking measures to forestall anything of the kind. Robin was both irritated and puzzled. But he had a nimble wit and a touch of diplomacy. He was willing to concede a point, to make a concession.

"If I give her the go-by will you promise not to dance with Mark Steele?"

"Why, how can I," Ivy manifested surprise, "if he asks me?"

"You can tell him you got another partner," Robin suggested, "or say you're tired. Any darned fool thing girls say when they don't want to dance with a man."

"I can't," Ivy declared.

"You mean you won't. What's the difference in you dancin' with Shinin' Mark when you know I'd rather you wouldn't and me dancin' with Miss Sutherland?"

Robin kept his tone gentle although he had an impulse to shake soundly this morsel of perverse prettiness he held in his arms. He even managed to get a jocular note into what he said.

"Lots of difference. I've often danced with Mark. You never kicked. You never said you didn't want me to dance with him."

Robin was dumb. He couldn't tell Ivy why. He couldn't explain to her that he had never liked Mark Steele, nor why that dislike had suddenly become acute.

"Well," he said unhappily, "what's fair for one ought to be

fair for the other. If you're dead set on being mean, go ahead."

"I suppose you will dance with her?" the storm tone was growing in Ivy's voice.

"I didn't say I was going to."

"I know you. You never do anything I want."

"Oh, for the Lord's sake let's not spoil this with a row," Robin pleaded. "You know darned well I love you too much to bother my head about any other girl. What's wrong with May Sutherland more than any other girl here? You never asked me not to dance with Minnie Davis nor Bessie Santerre nor the school-teacher."

"I don't like her. I don't like the way she looked at you," Ivy muttered sullenly.

"Neither do I like the way Mark Steele looks at you, old girl," Robin lowered his voice. "And he looks at you that way every time he's around you. I never kicked about it before. I never acted like I wanted to put you in a glass case. I give you credit for havin' sense about men."

"Aw, pouf!"

There was an angry finality in Ivy's exclamation. They finished the waltz in silence and it was not a particularly enjoyable Terpsichorean effort for Robin Tyler. When they sat down he tried to talk about different matters but Ivy confined herself to "yes" or "no" or an occasional sarcastic "you don't say" until Robin gave up in despair. When the music began again Mark Steele slid across the floor and Ivy rose to dance with him. There was a defiant sidelong flicker in her eyes toward Robin as she got up.

His first impulse was to go outside and smoke a cigarette. Robin was disturbed and uneasy and resentful. He knew that was no frame of mind for dancing. The night, the stars, and a cigarette would drive that mood away. Like a wounded animal Robin instinctively sought solitude when he was hurt. All his minor victories over whatever griefs and disappointment had come his way had been won by thinking it out alone, on the plains, in lonely camps, in night watches under a quiet sky.

But as Robin rose to go his glance, taking in the room, fell upon May, sitting by her father. She was looking squarely at him. Moreover, from the other side of the room a large, ungainly stock hand from the head of Sand Creek, who had taken

one drink too many before he came to the dance, was staring earnestly at May, evidently meditating descent, since she was the only woman not already on the floor.

Robin's mood changed in the flick of an eyelash. If Ivy wanted to—well, let her! He strode over to May.

"I thought you were going to beat a retreat," she murmured, when they were on the floor. "You aren't shy, are you?"

"You don't know me very well," Robin replied. "The only time you ever saw me I didn't act very shy, did I?"

"That was different," she laughed. "A cow-puncher on a horse, on his own ground—that *is* different. Some of these nice-looking boys act as if they weren't sure it was safe to approach me."

"A fellow hates to get turned down," Robin observed. "You're a big, strange toad in the puddle—oh, darn it, I didn't mean that."

"It's a perfectly proper simile," she hastened to assure him. "I know what you mean. I am. But no one need be afraid of splashing me. I like to dance. I like fun as well as any other girl in these hills."

"I expect you do," Robin somehow found it easy to talk to her. "But you cut a lot of ice in this country, or your dad does, and it's the same thing. I expect after the kind of dances you're used to and the people you've lived among this don't exactly look like no Fourth of July celebration to you. A cow-puncher may be wild and woolly but he's no fool. He knows when he's out-classed—as far as a girl is concerned."

"You are a rather wide-awake young man in some respects," she said thoughtfully. Then after a momentary silence she changed the subject. "Who is the pretty little dark-haired girl you brought?"

"That's Ivy Mayne."

"Oh, so that's Ivy. She doesn't seem to know me. Well, I don't suppose she would."

"You know Ivy?" Robin pricked up his ears. He had never heard Ivy so much as mention May Sutherland.

"Why, we began school together right here in this room. At least I had been going a couple of years when Ivy commenced. There were only six pupils. I attended this school until I was twelve. Then I went away to boarding school."

"Were you two chummy at all?" Robin inquired.

May wrinkled her brows slightly.

"It seems to me we agreed to disagree on various occasions," she replied. "I was a good deal of a spitfire in those days. If I remember correctly I used to flare up and then Ivy would sulk. What silly things girls do when they're kids," she laughed reminiscently. "I shouldn't have known her. She's awfully good looking, isn't she? Perfect features and beautiful eyes. How has she escaped capture here in the Bear Paws where there are six men for every woman? Dad says no school-teacher has ever taught more than a single term. They always get married. How has Ivy kept her freedom?"

"Hard to catch, I guess," Robin made a noncommittal reply.

He did not say that he had tentatively captured Ivy. Here, to-night, for the first time in the six months they had been formally engaged he had a doubt of his capture being complete. And besides that doubt he did not want to talk about Ivy Mayne to this fair-haired girl who floated in his clasp light as a feather.

When that dance ended May left him to go straight to Ivy. Robin saw her shake hands and sit down beside Dan Mayne's daughter and talk with a gracious smile. He didn't stay to see the outcome of that. He was a little uneasy. He knew Ivy. She could be gracious when she chose, but she could also be very difficult with members of her own sex. Robin let his desire for a smoke take him outside. There, as he leaned against the building he overheard a snatch of conversation just around the corner. He knew one of the voices—Tex Matthews. The other was strange. Robin would have moved instantly, but the first sentence held him.

"Who was the good-lookin' kid dancin' with Sutherland's daughter. I don't mean young Stevens or the other one—the boy with the wavy hair?"

"Robin Tyler. You know—I told you."

"I see. An' that was his girl Shinin' danced with. Say, they make well-matched couples paired that way, eh? Looked to me like the blond princess likes the kid. An' I don't reckon the red-headed school-teacher better be too sure of Mark, eh? Two pair, queens up."

The man chuckled at his fancy.

"Queens all right," Matthews drawled. "Well, I've seen two

pair, queens up, hard to beat before now."

"Old Adam Sutherland could beat any two pair in the deck with an ace in the hole, the way he's fixed," the other man laughed. "I don't suppose old Adam aims his girl to marry no common cow hand. Still, you never can tell. I'd play that curly-headed kid for a king any time."

"And the other one's a jack—a measly jack," Matthews said harshly. "Remember that old jingle 'The queen of hearts, she made some tarts upon a summer day. The jack of hearts, he stole those tarts and carried them away.' Well——"

"Say," the other man lowered his voice discreetly, "Don't talk like that out loud, Tex. Cracks like that can make trouble. I guess we better not hit that bottle again."

"It wasn't whisky made me say that," Tex replied. "And I don't ever talk in my sleep. There won't be no trouble until—well, until I know better where we're at. Then maybe I'll start her myself."

Robin withdrew softly, a little ashamed for listening, a little disturbed by what he had heard—and puzzled also by the last exchange of sentences. But it seemed to have no bearing on his affairs. There was a two-step playing now and Robin sought a partner.

By midnight he had been unable to claim more than a couple of dances from Ivy and these she quite patently danced under protest, refusing to smile at him, scarcely condescending to talk. This sullen resentment she kept for him alone. With every other man she was bright as new-minted gold, even gay. And she danced oftenest of all with Mark Steele. Slowly there grew in Robin's breast a curiously mingled ache and anger. She wouldn't play fair and he was impotent to do anything about it.

For the supper dance Ivy flatly turned him down.

"Go dance it with May Sutherland," she said tartly. "I got a partner."

"What you tryin' to do to me, Ivy?" he asked soberly.

"Nothin' at all. I'm just having a good time. Isn't that what we come to a dance for?"

Go dance it with May Sutherland! All right, Robin said to himself. He would—if he could. If it was to be everybody for himself and the devil take the hindmost, why not be in the van? He knew what partner Ivy meant. He knew what construction

every man and woman there would put on Ivy's eating supper with Shining Mark. They would infer that Mark had cut him out, and there would be just the faintest anticipation of trouble. Robin grimly promised to fool them there. He would never jump Mark Steele over a woman's fickle whim. If Ivy was fool enough to throw herself at Shining Mark in a fit of groundless jealousy—she could! No, if and when he clashed with Mark Steele it would be over something more serious than a girl's favor.

So Robin stood by and when Mark did claim Ivy for the supper dance he looked about for May. On second thought he expected to find her dancing with young Stevens or young Harper. But Stevens was paired with Miss Rose Barton and young Harper had appropriated the auburn-haired school-teacher. Robin had in the course of the evening been introduced to all three. He had danced with Rose, a gay and lightsome damsel from Helena, who confided to Robin that she had come there in some trepidation since she had never before seen the cowboy on his native heath. Having been told sundry tales by Adam Sutherland and young Stevens she half expected the Block S riders to take the floor in woolly chaps and jingling spurs, to make the welkin ring with shouts and perhaps occasionally fire a shot through the roof in their unrestrained exuberance.

"Too bad," Robin had sympathized mockingly. "And you find us a tame outfit wearin' store clothes and collars and patent leather shoes and actin' like anybody at any ordinary dance. Maybe some of the boys might put on a little wild west specially for your benefit if you mentioned it."

But Miss Barton hastened to assure him that she wanted no such displays. The Block S men were good dancers. She liked cow-punchers, she informed him archly, if several of those present were a fair sample.

For the moment the rest of the Sutherland crowd had vanished. He didn't see Adam anywhere. Looking about he got a flash of May in the lean-to helping two or three older women arrange sandwiches on platters. The smell of coffee floated out of this room.

Robin went outside. He didn't want to dance. He didn't want to eat. He was acutely uncomfortable. He boiled within and the accumulated pressure of emotion was a long time yielding to the solace of tobacco and the quiet night. Under the dusky pines,

the high hills that walled in the little valley, the soundless velvet sky, Robin presently regained his poise. He knew Ivy through and through. She was acting like a fool. She knew it and tomorrow or the next day she would be sorrowful and contrite. Since he could never hold a grudge against her it would be all right. No use getting all "het up," as old Mayne would say. Robin was no philosopher. But he did have certain qualities of mind which made him patient, resourceful, an unconscious practitioner of the saying that what cannot be cured must be endured. He could wait and hold on, without losing heart.

The lilt of the fiddle and the thump of the piano presently apprised him that supper was over. He thought he might as well go in. There was a chilly comfort in the reflection that no one would have missed him, or wondered where he was. So he lingered to smoke another cigarette. Strangely his mental images were not of Ivy and Shining, nor of May Sutherland, nor indeed of anything pertaining to the night and the hour. His mind went back to the day he lamed Stormy by Cold Spring and what he saw in the Birch Creek bottom. He thought of cows dead of sudden death, of stolen calves, of many other trifling incidents which somehow all seemed to be falling into a definite sequence that must lead to some sort of climax in which he was bound to be involved. He knew what desperate chances rustlers take once they embark on the quick road to a bigger herd than comes by natural growth. Theft led to killing, as the cornered highwayman kills. That was the history of the cattle thief all the way from the Staked Plains to the forty-ninth parallel. Robin wondered where this unlawful venture of Mark Steele's was going to lead all of them, more particularly himself. He knew, moreover, as matters stood, that if Ivy gave Mark Steele a definite impression that she could be his for the taking—and Mark wanted her—he and Mark Steele couldn't live in the same country. It wasn't big enough.

He threw away his cigarette and went back to the schoolhouse. There was a quicker tempo in evidence. There had been three or four bottles of whisky cached around outside. No one was drunk, but high spirits were being more freely manifested. That was a custom of the country, seldom lacking observance.

In the entry-way, a sort of lobby, Robin met Ivy. She had on her riding boots and coat.

"You going now?" he said in surprise. "Wait till I get my hat."

"Never mind," she answered stiffly. "Mr. Steele is going to take me up to Davis's."

For a breath Robin literally saw red, a red mist that momentarily fogged his vision. By an effort he shook that off. That gust of unreasoning fury had a double effect. It was like a physical pain—and it frightened him. He understood in that moment why men strangely run amuck. Yet in one corner of his brain a small, weak voice seemed to be saying, "Don't act like a damn fool. Don't act like a damn fool."

He forced himself to say with a smile, "Oh, all right."

Then Steele appeared, hat in hand, jaunty. He flashed a look that Robin read as amused triumph—and Robin let that pass.

"Good-night," he said to Ivy quite casually and went on in, straight to where he saw May Sutherland talking to another girl. He wouldn't give either Ivy or Steele the satisfaction of looking back, though he knew instinctively that both were watching him while Mark leaned against the wall buckling on his silver spurs.

"Will you dance this?" Robin asked May.

She didn't say she would. She rose with a faint smile and put her hand on his arm. As they turned the first corner of the room Robin saw the other two pass out, Ivy flinging a last glance over her shoulder.

"If they think I'm going to care a curse——" he didn't finish the sentence in his mind. It wasn't true. He did care. His pride as well as his affection was involved in that episode. Any other man but Shining Mark! Then he put it resolutely aside and talked to May.

"I'm going home after this number," May told him presently. "Some of these men have had one drink too many. I'm a little bit tired. I've danced everything but the supper dance."

"They do get lit up once in a while," Robin admitted. "How did you come? Buggy?"

"No, we all rode up. Dad and Bill Harper went home before supper. Billy doesn't care much about dancing, and I think he had a little tiff with Rose."

"I'm about ready to go myself," Robin said. "I'll ride down with you if you like."

"Didn't you bring a girl?" May looked at him curiously. "Isn't it proper to take *her* home?"

"Sure. But she's gone home already," Robin answered evenly, "with another wild cowboy."

May said nothing to that for a minute. Then: "All right, if you *are* going. Rose and Joe are having too good a time to leave yet."

"I'll find your horse and bring him to the door."

"Thanks. It's the chestnut I rode the other day. Will you know him?"

"Sure. I'd know your saddle anyhow, by those funny little *tapaderos*."

The music stopped. Robin got his hat and went out. When he led the two horses to the steps in front May was waiting. Rose Barton and Ed Stevens were with her. Three or four other dancers had come out for a breath of air. They stood chatting and laughing in the light from the open doorway. Robin suspected that tongues would wag freely about himself and Mark Steele and Ivy and May. But he didn't care—if May didn't. It struck him that probably May would never know that people were wagging their tongues, and that she would only be amused if she did know. If a king—whether a king in cattleland or a monarch by right divine—could do no wrong, a king's daughter wore no lesser mantle.

"Take care you don't get lost," Rose Barton teased. "You'll see that bandits don't carry her off and hold her for ransom, won't you, Mr. Tyler?"

"Oh, sure," Robin flung back, as he swung into his saddle. "If we meet up with outlaws I'll be the cowboy hero. Goodnight, everybody."

They rode down that dark creek bottom. Little Eagle muttered in its pebbly channel bteween lines of drooping willow. Smells of pine came down from hills black against the paler sky. They rode silently, side by side, each seeing the other's face as a pale blur in the darkness.

It wasn't far to the Block S. They crossed a horse pasture, came into another enclosure where loomed a diversity of dim buildings, a great monument of a barn. Beyond these on a little knoll rose the king's castle, a one-story structure sprawling in three wings added from time to time in the last fifteen years as

the Sutherland fortunes expanded. A light glowed in one window.

"Have a good time?" Robin asked when they dismounted.

"Oh, splendid," she murmured. "Everybody seemed to enjoy it so."

"They generally do."

"And I was lucky besides," May laughed. "I got through the whole evening without having to dance with the Block S range foreman. I wonder if that man affects anybody else the way he does me? When I look at him I'd as soon have a snake touch me. It's queer."

"I guess there's others don't like him much," Robin agreed. "And I don't suppose he cares. Will I put your horse in the barn, Miss Sutherland?"

"Oh, no, don't bother. Just lay the saddle by the steps and turn him loose."

Robin did so. May stood by until the chestnut went free.

"Well, I reckon you want to get in your little trundle bed." Robin lifted his hat. "So, I'll ramble."

"Good-night," said May softly. "Take care of yourself, Robin Tyler. Don't let any bad horses fall on you so you won't be able to go to dances in the Bear Paws this winter."

"No fear," Robin shook the extended hand and turned to his stirrup. "It won't be bad horses that'll keep me from dancin'. Good-night."

In twenty minutes Robin was in his blankets, in a camp still all but deserted. Sleep came slowly. When he did fall asleep he dreamed a lot of fantastic stuff in which Mark Steele, Ivy, himself, May Sutherland, dead cows, lonely sage-grown bottoms, herds of T Bar S's and dancing couples mixed and whirled in a disorderly fantasy. And somehow he seemed to move amid these scenes and persons with his hands tied behind his back, the sport of all the others.

CHAPTER IX

A DIFFERENT SORT OF DANCE

THE first circle the Block S made the next morning covered that portion of the Range between the home ranch and Shadow Butte. Afternoon saw the outfit camped on Little Birch a gunshot above Robin's homestead. That evening Steele assigned him to "cocktail," range slang for the short watch on herd between supper and dusk. Then he was slated for middle guard. Even if he had desired to ride down and see Ivy, Robin had no time. He was not sure he should go. Ivy's anger did not always evaporate like mist in the brightness of her lover's smile. In another day or two she might be able to laugh at that tantrum. To-night the sun might still be setting on her wrath.

When they rode at dawn they passed within a hundred yards of the house. That afternoon the chuck wagon rolled down Birch to a point near Cold Spring. For four days the Block S worked in the heart of Dan Mayne's range, without Mayne once appearing at the round-up. Usually when the outfit worked his territory the old man rode with them. Robin guessed that Mayne kept away because he couldn't stand close contact with the man who was stealing his stock. Anyway Robin had his instructions and he knew marketable beef when he saw it. A third of the cattle in each round-up carried the Bar M Bar. Robin cut over a hundred prime beeves into the day herd for shipment.

Well below Cold Spring a sprinkling of T Bar S stuff began to show. There was no shipping beef in that brand. But every cow had her calf marked. Once or twice Robin noted a T Bar S calf without a mother, a little bit lean and scraggly—orphans. There would be others, he surmised, which he did not see. One man couldn't see everything over a territory fifty miles wide and a hundred miles long. Not once in that region did he spot a Bar M Bar cow with an unbranded calf at side. Nor

did Robin again have opportunity to see what Steele and Thatcher did when they took the outside circle by themselves. That happened less often. Robin knew Steele would be wary now anywhere within a few miles of the Mayne ranch. The man might take long chances but he was not a fool.

As they worked east of Chase Hill the T Bar S cattle grew more plentiful.

"For a man who lives in Helena, who don't have no rider, who don't ever show up himself, this here Jim Bond sure gets his stock well looked after," Tex Matthews remarked to Robin one day. "He'll do well in the cow business, I reckon.

"How?" Robin inquired.

Tex shrugged his shoulders.

"If I didn't know you, kid, I might think maybe you were asleep. There's awful good care took in this country to see that all Jim Bond's calves get branded."

"You don't reckon he gets branded for him more'n the law allows?" Robin hazarded.

The Texan looked hard at him for a second. Then he smiled.

"If it was anything to me; if I had stock in these parts, I'd be mighty curious about this T Bar S," he drawled. "I sure would. As it is, it ain't a Block S man's business to be curious about anything but Block S stuff."

"Even if Block S calves should happen to grow a T Bar S on their ribs?"

The Texan sat sidewise in his saddle and gazed at Robin with a faint uplift at one corner of his thin lips.

"Well," he remarked with seeming irrelevance, "I reckon the Bar M Bar 'rep' don't go to sleep at the switch. Say, did you ever know a man get ambitious and figure out wise little schemes to make him rich off his neighbors?"

"Seems like I've heard of such."

"So've I. I have an idea somebody not a million miles away might know more about this T Bar S than we do. No, sir. I shouldn't be surprised. Only," he added thoughtfully, "you needn't mention I said so."

"I ain't a great hand at mentionin'," Robin grunted.

"Old Jim Bond, he's supposed to turn a hundred and fifty head of stuff south of the Bear Paws a year ago last spring," Matthews rambled on. "I guess a man don't make no fortune out

of a one-horse saloon in Helena. Now wouldn't it be fine for old Jim if his stock doubled in a year, and kept on. At that rate in five years or so he'd be quite a cowman. Only I have a sort of hunch that in a good deal less'n five years somebody else 'll own the T Bar S."

"Who'll it be?" Robin asked idly. They were sitting on a rise of ground that overlooked a southward bend of the Missouri, waiting for the last drive to come into the round-up.

"Well, I ain't sure. But I could give a guess. So could you."

"In five years," Robin prophesied, "Adam Sutherland'll own the T Bar S—or it won't be used on cows."

"Maybe so, maybe so," Tex said. "I expect somebody'll be surprised when old Adam decides to own the T Bar S, though."

"What you gettin' at, Tex?" Robin demanded bluntly.

"Just passin' the time in talk," Matthews drawled. "Say, did you never pack a six-gun?"

Robin shook his head. "I never even owned one."

"How come you never did? First kid I ever saw on the range that didn't like to play with a pistol."

"Never took much to it," Robin told him. "My old man was killed in a gun play when I was about ten. My mother was dead set against burnin' powder. She'd seen too much of it. She was a Terry. Seems like the Tylers and Terrys have thrown lots of lead down South where she come from. She kinda discouraged me packin' a pistol. She used to say that if I ever needed one bad enough I could get it when it was wanted. When I started to ride I never thought much about a six-pistol. Never needed one. I carry a rifle in the winter for wolves, and I've hunted deer an' antelope quite a lot. Why?"

"Oh, I just wondered. You're a good-natured, easygoin' jasper that laughs trouble away. But what'd you do if some bad *hombre* jumped you out of pure cussedness and started to make a monkey outa you?"

"I don't know. Never had that happen." The idea amused Robin slightly. He laughed. "I've been around a few bad actors. I never seen any of 'em jump a man who wasn't armed and kinda sorta ready for trouble—not without some good reason."

"Some men's reasons for startin' trouble ain't known to nobody but themselves," Tex observed. "But they stir her up just the same."

Matthews' last sentence recurred to Robin as being almost prophetic before the afternoon was over. The riders had swept a range where stock was thick. They had bunched over a thousand head and were cutting beef on three sides in swirls of dust. Twilight would be on them before the last steer was separated from that milling herd. They had worked at top speed for two months. Now at the end of a hard day both horses and men were tired and short-tempered. They rode fast and silently.

Robin was well mounted. Energetic and alert, he held his own wherever he found himself, but a continuous darting of steers from the herd to the cut had kept him so steadily on the jump that when a lull came he let his horse stand and sat rolling himself a cigarette.

Steele shot an animal out of the herd. The brute went at a swinging trot and Steele pulled up. Then the beast suddenly changed its bovine mind and charged back. Steele laid his horse alongside. The animal dodged this way and that. Headed on each attempt by an active cutting horse the steer finally joined his fellows in the cut. Robin sat still and watched. It was nothing. If it had been a little nearer he might have taken the animal off Steele's hands and left him free to cut out another. Such an action was not compulsory. On the other side of the herd these dodging contests were occurring every minute or two. But Steele reined up beside him.

"Wake up and ride, you — — — !" he snarled in a tone so low Robin knew Steele intended no one but himself should hear. "Think all you got to do is be an ornament?"

The epithet amazed Robin. His face flamed. Before he could open his mouth Steele dashed back into the herd.

Robin gasped. His first impulse was to spur his horse after Shining Mark. No man could take that. Those were fighting words. Yet Steele wasn't making a war talk or he would have shouted so that every man could hear and there would have been no avoiding the issue. Robin's brain worked fast. He knew that Steele was quite calm and collected. What he said he said deliberately, with a considered purpose.

"You're lookin' for trouble," Robin said thoughtfully. "But you aim to make *me* start it. I *sabe* your play. You'll have to try again. I won't give you no openin'."

Twice in the next three days Steele dug into Robin. Each

time they were out of earshot of any rider. Each time Shining Mark flayed him with insult, with provocative abuse. The second time Robin said quietly: "You're wastin' ammunition, Mark. You can't kill me with a blank cartridge. Why don't you make these fighting talks before the outfit?"

Shining Mark looked him coldly in the eye.

"Maybe I will," said he. "What'll you do then?"

"Whatever I do everybody'll know you got it in for me and forced the play," Robin told him. "You'll never start me smokin' you up by whispering nasty remarks in my ear. I don't give a damn what you say to me under your breath. *Sabe?*"

Steele sidled his horse up close beside Robin. He leaned forward.

"You're yellow," he said, with a sneer. "Yellow clear through. You know you are. I can take your girl away from you, spit in your face, and you're afraid to make a break. When I get through with you a sheep herder could make you step sideways every time he blatted at you. I'll make you jump at your own shadow."

"I wouldn't be too sure of that if I was you," Robin drawled. A most unnatural calm seemed to possess him. He felt rather indifferent to Steele's venomous abuse. Any feeling Shining Mark betrayed was mere simulation. Every move he made, every word he uttered was calculated, part of a design. Its effect on Robin was to make him wary, watchful. If there had been any real passion in Steele's attitude some spark in Robin would have matched it in spite of himself.

"Talk's cheap," Robin continued. "You're pretty small potatoes, it strikes me, to shoot off your face the way you do when you've got a gun on your hip and I haven't. You're the yellow dog, it strikes me."

"You can always heel yourself," Mark suggested.

"Why are you so keen to have me make a break at you?"

"So I can kill you," Mark returned, "I don't like you."

"If you kill everybody you don't like," Robin curled his lip, "you sure must have a big graveyard. Where do you bury your dead, anyway?"

He laughed in Steele's face and Shining's thin, handsome features grew dark with a genuine scowl.

"I'll make you laugh on the other side of your face," he

snapped. "You watch. Before the snow flies I'll get you."

"I hear you," Robin taunted. "You sound like the buzzing of a mosquito to me."

"Of course you can always quit the country," Mark said significantly, and swung his horse away in a lope.

So that was it! Robin sat looking after the Block S range boss. He had thought himself cool and he found that he was shaking with anger and he knew that his face was white. Probably Shining Mark thought those were the signs of a man who was getting the fear of God put in his heart. So *that* was the play. Put fear into him so that he would quit the Bar M Bar, quit the country. Men had shifted ranges before now to avoid trouble with a potential killer. Steele was all that. Robin didn't doubt that Shining Mark would make his word good. He had made other men walk around him by virtue of some inner force to which weaker spirits submitted. Robin had recognized that dynamic quality long before he had dreamed of a personal clash with Mark Steele.

But he did not believe that Mark had reached the stage where he considered it necessary to bushwhack him. His personal safety necessitated Robin Tyler's mouth being stopped from mentioning cows dead of sudden death and calves stealthily branded. Robin did not believe Steele had yet reached the point where he would pick a row in public—force him to burn powder. That in itself would arouse a curiosity as to what fire lay behind the smoke. Steele's game seemed clear to Robin. It was simply to treat him like any other man in public and privately to goad him beyond all endurance until in desperation he belted on a six-shooter and started something. Whereupon in self-defense Mark would kill him in a workmanlike manner.

Mark was deadly with a six-shooter. He had killed nothing but badgers and prairie dogs with his belt-gun since he had been with the Block S. But he had potted whatsoever he shot at with a skill which argued long practice. He was fast on the draw. He shot as a man throws a stone, with instinctive rather than measured aim. Perhaps one range rider in a hundred ever developed that perfect coördination of hand and eye with a .45 Colt. The man who had it—along with courage—could be assured of respectful consideration from his fellows.

No, Robin told himself, he would not walk into *that* trap.

CHAPTER X

A WORD AND A BLOW

NO man can altogether escape the dominant influences of his environment. For good or evil his thought and action must be colored by the thought and action of his fellows, as his speech will be colored by the current idioms.

Robin, in spite of his resolution not to be snared in the net Mark Steele spread for his feet, found himself suffering all the agonies of shame for indignities passed over in silence. Steele did his best to make his life a misery during the few days it took the Block S to move its beef herd within sight of the Big Sandy stockyards. At no time did he overstep that limit which would have brought his crew up standing in expectation of an open clash. He said nothing, did nothing openly that would have been impossible for Robin to let go by. But he shaved close. Robin knew that every man in the outfit was scenting some sort of hidden animosity between the two. Steele was curt, peremptory, oblique, before the outfit. But whenever he caught Robin alone he abused him with a venom that would have been unendurable if Robin had not known it as part of a calculated plan.

He took it all, outwardly unruffled, inwardly approaching the volcanic state. He could afford to let Steele think he was afraid. Perhaps he was. Robin was not ashamed to admit to himself that he might be afraid. He did not desire to commit suicide. To grab anybody's gun and match himself against Shining Mark was the equivalent of self-destruction.

There was neither satisfaction nor glory in being shot by a cow thief merely because a cow thief considered that a good way to cover up his tracks. Yet short of killing Steele or being killed by him Robin could see no way out of this predicament except the unthinkable one Mark had suggested—that he quit the country. He might be afraid to tackle Steele but he was

not sufficiently afraid to run. If he did not run Mark would eventually force him to burn powder. And the onus would be on him, his blood would be upon his own head, to all outward appearances. Steele was seeing to that. By every artifice in his repertoire he was putting Robin in the position of having to force the issue or feel himself in reality what Mark contemptuously said he was—a yellow dog.

So matters stood when the herd was trimmed and the cattle loaded. The outfit was to lie there on the Big Sandy flats for a day or two. Shipping was done. There were odds and ends of range work for the riders yet, but the range had been combed once, and so for a couple of days they would rest and play.

They were rid of the herd by two o'clock and back in camp releasing their tired mounts and catching fresh horses to ride into town. Tex Matthews caught a horse, as did Robin. But when the riders swung up Tex sat on the wagon tongue rolling a cigarette. Robin leaned against a wheel, silently thinking. The *remuda* was still in the rope corral. He had half a mind to rope out his string, pack his bed, and go home.

"Come on, cowboys," a Block S man called to them. "The first drink's on me."

Matthews shook his head.

"I'm keepin' the cook and wrangler company," he drawled. "I'll save money. There's a long, hard winter comin'."

Robin said nothing. The riders laughed and departed. The dust rose in a low banner behind them and settled on ground made barren by the trample of ten thousand hoofs.

Matthews finished his cigarette, strolled to the cook tent, got himself a biscuit and a bit of cold beef. He returned munching and joined Robin. They squatted on their heels by the wagon. They talked of inconsequent matters. From where they sat they could see the gable of the Silver Dollar saloon. Neither man was a hermit by nature. The cow-puncher had the social instinct. All his work was done *en masse*. Tex and Robin grew silent. They could picture the rest of the crew swapping yarns and ribald jokes. There would be a poker game or two, town men to meet, while they sat there in a dead camp.

"Hell, let's ride," Matthews suggested at last. "I thought I wouldn't until to-night. But—let's ride in."

"All right," Robin agreed.

He had given up the notion of leaving the round-up just yet. There might be a stray Bar M Bar picked up. And even if Matthews' reason had been as stated Robin Tyler had not stayed in camp to avoid needless spending. He doubted if Tex had done so. Between himself and this middle-aged Texan a restrained, wordless friendship seemed to have grown during the fall round-up. Robin suspected Tex had stayed in camp because he himself had showed no inclination to go. And Robin had not ridden in with the cowboys because he knew little pleasure lay in store for him while Steele was in the crowd. He would be wary, uneasy, uncertain what moment Shining Mark would choose to maneuver him into a situation from which he might only emerge feet first.

"I guess the crowd's in Monty's from the looks," Tex remarked when they rode in among the houses. "Let's join 'em and hoist a couple, then go over to the Silver Dollar an' see if there's a game goin'. Will you play?"

"I might play ten dollars' worth," Robin said.

In search of diversion he would rather play poker than drink. Robin played poker with much the same verve that characterized his riding. His luck at cards had made many a stock hand utter the old saying, "Lucky at poker; lucky in love. You ought to be a winner with the girls, kid."

Most of the Block S men were in Monty's place. They stood along the bar. Steele was among them and Tommy Thatcher. Tommy in the hour or so that had elapsed had contrived to build up a comfortable jag. His voice, when he spoke, was unnaturally loud. The clatter of talk filled the place. Over in one corner a drunken sheep-herder slept in a chair, a bright-eyed collie stretched on the floor by his feet.

A "rep" from the Shonkin was signaling the bartender as they entered. "Hey, you're just in time," he grinned. "Line up here."

He lifted his glass and chanted:

"Good corn whisky in a polished glass!
Feed it to the cowboys when the range turns brown.
Cows don't want no liquor, all they need is grass.
So here's to good corn whisky! Drink her down!
Drink her down!"

Robin found a space between Tommy Thatcher and another man. Mark Steele craned his head to look at Robin with a sardonic twist of his lips. Robin met his gaze squarely. And as their glances clashed Robin felt Tommy Thatcher move. He felt his hand touch something. Thatcher had moved in drunken uncertainty, or Robin had been careless. A little of Thatcher's whisky had spilled on the bar.

"What the hell! What you shovin' for?"

"I didn't shove you, Tommy," Robin said gently.

"No back talk to me!" Thatcher roared. "Make room for a *man.*"

He bristled up against Robin. It was not in that young man's mind to give ground for any one. If Steele himself had thrust arrogantly in his face like that he would have done just what he did to Thatcher—put out his hand and shoved him back.

Thatcher stiffened as if someone had struck him. He leaned a little forward, rose on the balls of his feet. It flashed into Robin's mind that Thatcher was suddenly sober—that he had only been playing drunk. But he had only a flicker of time for thought. Thatcher said hoarsely:

"You blasted, pink-cheeked pup!"

With the words he threw his glass of whisky in Robin's face. For a few seconds Robin felt as if a flame had seared him. He was blind, blind and in pain. His hands, groping, caught an end of the silk scarf draped about his neck. With that he dabbed at his burning eyes.

They cleared. With tear ducts flooding, with the sting and burn well-nigh unendurable, still after a fashion he could see. Thatcher held his aggressive pose, his right hand by his side with the elbow crooked so that his fingers were even with the curved grip of the gun which he wore on his belt. Near him Mark Steele leaned on the bar, impassively watching.

Thatcher's face cracked in a wide grin and something happened in Robin Tyler's breast. He had never in his young life struck a blow nor fired a shot in anger. But for all his deceptive slimness he was a powerful man, lithe, hard, with untapped reservoirs of nervous energy.

What he did was to take a step toward Thatcher. When the Texan's fingers closed on his pistol grip Robin leaped at him like a sprinter off the mark so that all the weight of his body

was behind the fist that caught Thatcher on the point of his chin.

The Texan went down backward as if a horse had kicked him. The back of his head banged like a hammer on the foot rail that ran along the base of the bar. He lay where he fell, blood oozing out of his mouth and nostrils. The dozen-odd men in the room stood still, hushed, almost holding their breath. A man's fist beating a tentative gun play was rare in the cow country—and the man was little more than a boy. There was something about him as he stood there that made them very quiet, made their faces sober.

Then Mark Steele laughed, a queer mirthless sound.

"Well, well," said he. "If somebody took an ax and chopped about forty pounds off John L. Sullivan maybe we could match Tyler with him."

The red mist flashed again before Robin's smarting eyeballs. But he didn't try to hit Mark Steele. He didn't want to touch Steele with his hands. He wanted to destroy him. Somehow he knew that Steele had taken a new tack, that he had started Tommy Thatcher on him. Robin made a dive for the Colt sticking out of Thatcher's scabbard. Live or die he would put an end to this.

But he didn't get it. Tex Matthews and half a dozen other hands grabbed him. They could hold him, but they could not stop his mouth. He twisted himself to face Steele who stood erect now, smiling slightly. Things were coming Steele's way now.

"You dirty dog!" Robin said to him. "You've been tryin' to work me up to something, and you've done it. You want to choke me off because I know too much. You two-faced cow thief! You would-be killer that sicks another man onto somebody else. Why don't you come out in the open and do your own dirty work?"

"You're crazy, kid," Mark said mockingly. "You sure got a powerful temper. You're reckless with words."

"Not as reckless as you are with other men's stock."

"Well," Shining Mark shrugged his shoulders, "if other men aren't men enough to look after their stock—as you call it—*I* don't see where I'm to blame because your girl asks *me* to ride home with her."

He shrugged his shoulders again, contemptuously.

"Oh, oh!" Robin choked on his words. "By God, Steele, I'll kill you for that."

"Lord, it's a windy day." Shining Mark settled his hat on the back of his dark head. "Now you've made your little war-talk, suppose you get the boys to turn you loose so you can make it good. Go heel yourself if that's how you feel. You can always find *me.*"

"Turn me loose," Robin commanded. "I'm through talkin'."

They let him go and stood clear. All but Matthews. Tex kept his hand lightly on Robin's arm.

"Lend me your gun, Tex," Robin had pinched all the feeling out of his voice. He asked for the weapon as casually as he might have asked for a match.

Matthews shook his head.

"I can't do that," he said slowly. "You know I can't."

"Here. Some of you fellows lend a hand with Tommy." Steele turned his back on Robin and bent over his fallen friend. With the help of other Block S riders they lifted up the unconscious man while the bar-tender passed over a pitcher of water to revive him.

Robin looked at them a second. It was against the range code for any man in that room to lend him a gun, under such circumstances. He made for the door. There were other men in town, who as yet did not know of this clash. Perhaps—he strode away to the Silver Dollar, and Matthews kept step beside him.

It was the same there. Robin left the saloon, went up past the the single row of houses toward the Sutherland store. If he couldn't borrow he could buy. And still beside him walked Tex Matthews. Half way between saloon and store Robin halted.

"What you stickin' with me for?" he demanded.

"I'm your friend," Tex said. "If you ever needed one you do now. After a while I got somethin' to say to you."

"It's all said," Robin muttered and walked on. "I got to get a gun."

"Sure. But you won't get one in this man's town to-day."

News bears wings in a hamlet. It seems indeed if it be ill news to have a telepathic quality of transmission. Robin made his request matter-of-factly. Buying a Colt revolver was prob-

ably as common a transaction as buying a hat. But the clerk shook his head.

"Sorry," he said, "but we can't do it."

Robin pointed to a row of weapons protruding from a shelf.

"You got 'em for sale," said he. "My money's as good as anybody's. You take it for tobacco and clothes. Why not for a .45 and some ammunition?"

"Sorry," the man repeated. "I can't. I got orders."

Robin cast his eyes about the store. In the rear by the bookkeeper's desk Adam Sutherland sat smoking a cigar. Beyond him there was a figure Robin knew. He turned on his heel and walked out.

"The deck's stacked against me," he said a little bitterly to Matthews. "If I could get my hands on a gun I'd settle it quick, win, lose, or draw. I got to go through with it."

"Come over here and sit down a spell," Tex replied. "I got somethin' to say, myself."

He led the way to a pile of ties beside the spur track that served Sutherland's store. They sat down. Before them Big Sandy spread its limited area, two or three dozen buildings on a bald flat, dwellings surrounded by yards guiltless of tree or shrub. Beyond the town the Bear Paws loomed against the sky line, a purple mass with white tufts of cloud hovering about the high conical peaks.

"Advice in a case like this is about as welcome as ice cream in January," Matthews broke silence. "Just the same I got to pass some along. First off, you got no license to tangle with Mark Steele. You know what I mean."

"I know it. I got no choice."

"You've got this much choice," Tex pointed out. "You've declared yourself. But you ain't put no time limit on it. You made no break about givin' him two hours to quit town. You said you'd kill him. You can do that when you get ready. Keep your hat on an' let him think about that."

"Well?" Robin muttered.

"You ain't ready yet," Tex continued. "You won't have to go huntin' trouble now. It'll hunt you. You have an enemy in Shinin' Mark, but you'll have a worse one in Tommy Thatcher from now on. Steele's bad, but he's game. Thatcher's different. You busted him horrible. He'll get you if there's a chance, but it

won't be on the square. I know him better'n you do. I know of him a long time back."

"I don't know as that makes any difference," Robin muttered.

"As for Steele," Tex went on, "when it comes to gun play he's got it on you from soda to hock. He'll rattle you first—you got a hell of a temper, kid. And I've seen enough wild west to know you can't stack up against a cold-blooded proposition like Steele unless you're as cool as he is. Pass it up this time. Go home. Get yourself a forty-five that fits your hand. Spend your wages on ammunition. Practice faithful till spring. Then to get him.

"Meantime," Tex patted Robin on the shoulder, "I have a hunch what lays back of this trouble between you and Shinin' Mark. I seen enough this last week or so, to know he meant to crowd you till you turned on him. I ain't goin' to take this fight off your hands, Robin. But I can promise you one thing—if he gets you I'll get *him*. And that goes for Thatcher, too."

He lit a cigarette and stood up. "I'm amblin' along," he announced. "Think over what I said and do it. You'll win."

He stalked away. Robin sat on the ties staring at the ground. He appreciated Tex Matthew's moral backing, but it did not assuage the bitterness in his heart. He had seen a man or two run amuck and die with a smoking gun in hand and he had wondered what drove a man to such measures. He knew now. It was no comfort that he had punished Thatcher. Thatcher didn't count. He had played into Steele's hand.

If he were dead he could not talk about stolen calves. That was all Steele wanted, to stop his mouth or make him leave the country. If he went up against Steele now Mark would have his wish. With an even break for the draw Mark would kill him before he could get his gun leveled.

And still—when he recalled the look on Steele's face, the tone of his voice when he twisted Robin's remark about other men's stock into an opportunity to put a dirty slur on Ivy—he wanted a gun now. Chance or no chance! When that feeling surged up in him he felt as if he couldn't stand living while Shining Mark was free to talk like that. Yet, besides Matthews' advice, a cold little voice within Robin said that if he did arm himself and go after Steele now he was as good as a dead man. There was an uncomfortable chill in that assurance.

Robin sat deep in thought. He had forgotten where he was. The tempest of passion which had made his heart swell until it seemed as if it would burst had died out and left him depressed. He sat there locked up in himself and he did not hear or see May Sutherland until she spoke to him.

"Howdy," he answered her greeting. But he did not rise nor doff his hat. He didn't understand why she was there at all. She belonged in the camp of the enemy. When a man attacked the range boss of a big outfit the big outfit always stood behind its own man. He had forgotten that May hated Mark Steele. But May did have something to say to him for she sat down on the ties. "I heard about that trouble," she began. "I heard what Mark said to you and you to him. I'm awfully sorry."

"Don't know why you should be," Robin muttered. "Not your funeral."

"If there is to be a funeral I hope it will be his," May breathed. "But you are not going to be so foolish as to fight him, are you?"

Robin smiled bleakly. "You think a man should lie down and let another man walk over him?" he asked.

"I imagine Mark Steele could do and say things no one could pass up," she replied. "And what he said to you about Ivy was rather terrible in its significance."

"Oh, you got that too, eh?" Robin observed. "They talk in this town like a lot of old women. It got to you quick."

"It's always like that in a little place. Everybody knows all about everything at once."

"Yes. They think they do."

It ran in Robin's mind that Steele had made his hand very strong. Every one knew what had happened at the dance on Little Eagle. The natural inference was that Robin was crazy jealous since according to current conventions he had every reason to be. Thus Robin's threat would be tabbed as the fury of a jilted lover. If he jumped Steele and Steele killed him it would be a clear case of self-defense. Robin squirmed inwardly to think May Sutherland should regard him as merely a jealous man. But he could not now of all times put forward his uncorroborated word that Shining Mark wanted him out of the way because Mark was rustling stock and Robin Tyler had discovered certain incriminating facts.

"If everybody in Big Sandy has me sized up that way you won't get much credit for sittin' here talkin' to me," he said.

"I don't have to care what any one in Big Sandy thinks of what I do—except my father," she flashed at him. Her next sentence startled Robin. "Why did you call him a cow thief? It isn't like you to call names."

It was on the tip of Robin's tongue to say, "Because he is," but he checked that answer. If May wondered why he flung that at Mark, so might others wonder—even Sutherland himself, might ask himself if there *could* be any such fire behind the smoke. As matters stood, what he knew about Steele and Thatcher and the T Bar S might prove as effective a weapon to fight Steele as any .45. He could blunt the edge of that weapon by unsupported accusation now. They would say that young Tyler was shooting off his face instead of his gun.

"I got nothin' to say about that," he told May. "I got something to do about it, but I'm headed off just now because I can neither beg, borrow, nor steal a gun in this town, and I don't own one. I will, though, before long."

"You're determined to go through with this?"

"Say, you've grown up in this country, even if you went away to be educated," Robin said impatiently. "I couldn't live in this country if I went side-steppin' Mark Steele after this. You ought to know. Your dad has killed two men that I know of in his time."

May had a pair of gloves in her hand. She twisted them, rose to her feet.

"I wish you luck," she said in a wistful tone. "It seems to me utterly and terribly foolish for you to make a threat in a passion and then in cold blood live up to it. That's carrying regard for your word too far."

"I have a regard for my word," Robin said stiffly. "I never broke it yet. I don't say things I don't mean."

"Even in anger?"

"I never was so mad I'd say what I didn't mean," Robin protested. "That's when a man *does* say what he means. I do anyway."

"Then you really accused Mark of being a thief? It wasn't just an angry taunt, an insult?" she challenged.

"You seem mighty curious about that," Robin hedged.

"I am. Because if you know that to be true you would be a fool to risk your life in a clash with a man who is deadly with a gun. Let the law deal with him. There is law, and officers with authority to deal with a cattle thief. I wondered if there wasn't more in this trouble than just—just——"

"Just a row over a girl," Robin finished. "Well you're right. She was only dragged in to make the play strong. I didn't drag her in. Anyway, I don't want to discuss it any more. It's gone past the talkin' stage."

May looked down at him with a troubled air.

"I suppose you don't thank me for interesting myself in your affairs," she said. "But I'd much rather see Mark Steele dead or in jail, than you."

"So would I. I'd be tickled to death to have him on the inside looking out. Maybe you will."

"Dad is in the store. He told me to tell you he wanted to speak to you," May said abruptly. "Good-by—and good luck."

"Same to you," Robin returned. "Only you don't need no luck wish. You got all there is."

"Perhaps my luck doesn't take in as much territory as you think," May said over her shoulder as she walked away.

Robin watched her pass through the picket fence that enclosed the white cottage and its square of green and he wondered idly what she meant. Then he remembered Sutherland wanted to speak to him. About what? When Adam Sutherland expressed a desire to speak to a cow-puncher it was in the nature of a royal command. Robin was no subject of this cattle king's, but he had sufficient respect for Sutherland to heed the request.

Sutherland still occupied his big armchair.

"You wanted to see me?"

"Yeah. Sit down." Sutherland indicated another chair. "I want to give you some advice."

"Seems like I'm gettin' a heap of advice, one way and another, this afternoon," Robin observed dryly.

"Mine won't do you no harm," Sutherland rumbled. "About this trouble between you and Mark Steele—forget it. You said a lot of nasty things down in Monty's place. You made a bad break when you promised to kill Mark. You won't want to, once you've slept on that. Nobody's goin' to question your nerve. I knew your father by reputation, and your folks in the South.

You don't have to feel you got to shoot it out. Mark'll drop it if you will."

"Has he said so?" Robin asked.

"No," Sutherland admitted. "But I know he will."

"I make no promises," Robin said slowly. "I don't think you know your range boss as well as you think you do. He couldn't pass me up if he wanted to."

"You mean you wouldn't let him?" Sutherland interpreted.

"You can ask him what I mean. Maybe he'll tell you."

"Why in hell don't you say what you mean, out loud?"

"Seems to me I said what I mean right out loud and plain to the party concerned this afternoon," Robin answered. "I'm not swallowin' anything just so your range boss won't have to be mixed up in a fuss."

"He'll kill you sure, if you stack up against him," Sutherland grumbled. "I'd hate to see a kid like you get his light put out by one of my men. But, darn it, you can't call a man like Mark Steele a cow thief just because you're sore at him over a girl. That ain't reasonable. Mark hasn't put on his war-paint. You're the one that's lookin' for trouble."

"It looks that way," Robin conceded, "but things ain't always what they look."

"What was in the back of your mind to call Mark a cow thief, anyway?" Sutherland asked bluntly.

"You can ask him that, too," Robin said. "Here he comes."

Steele walked the length of the store as jauntily as if each stride were bringing him near a man with whom he would have been glad to shake hands instead of to kill.

"You ain't got no gun, have you?" Sutherland half-rose from his chair.

Robin shook his head.

"If I had it would be smokin' now," he muttered.

Steele came up to Sutherland and Robin. He was smiling. That is, his face and lips smiled, but his eyes were like gray agates, hard and cold and watchful.

"Hello, kid," he said. "Hope you got over bein' hostile. You don't really aim to kill me, now do you?"

"No. I've changed my mind," Robin answered quietly. "I'm goin' to put you in the penitentiary instead." With that he walked unconcernedly past Steele and out of the store.

CHAPTER XI

A BREATHING SPACE

ROBIN walked to where his horse stood, mounted and rode to camp. In half an hour he was jogging out the south trail behind his thirteen loose horses. Dark overtook him twenty miles from town. He penned his string in the corral of an abandoned horse ranch, spread his bed in an old cabin and slept, supperless. At dawn he tightened his belt a hole and rode again. At ten-thirty his horses ran nickering down the bank into the Mayne yard. A ranch hand working on a woodpile sauntered over to the corral. Robin saw Ivy come to the kitchen door and draw back.

"The old man around?" he inquired as the ranch hand helped him strip the gear off the pack horse.

"Uh-uh. Makin' a ride somewheres," the man said.

Robin shook off his spurs and chaps and went to the house. Ivy sat by the kitchen table, nursing her face in her hands. She looked up as Robin entered. She seemed sad, even a little afraid of him, and although Robin had seen her sulky, he had never known her to look subdued and unhappy.

He went up and put his arms about her.

"Hello, hon," he greeted. 'What for you look like the blue devils had got you? Aren't you glad to see me back?"

For answer Ivy put her dark head against him and wept. "I was scared," she got out at last. "It's all my fault. My heart's been in my mouth all day. I felt bad enough before—since that dance. But to-day." She shuddered.

"What's worryin' you now?" Robin asked.

He did not see how news of his clash with Mark Steele could possibly have reached the Bar M Bar so soon. Therefore something else had cropped up to trouble Ivy. But he was wrong.

"One of the Davis boys was in town yesterday," Ivy told him. "He got home in the night. Dad was up there seein' the kids.

Sam told him about you and Mark and Thatcher lockin' horns. Oh, Robin, I was lookin' to hear you'd been killed. I was scared —scared and sorry."

"You got nothin' to be sorry for about that," Robin soothed her.

"Didn't I act like a fool at that dance and stir things up?" Ivy mourned. "I asked Mark to take me to Davis's just to spite you. Ugh!"

She peered up into Robin's face. "Did you—did Mark?" She seemed unable to go farther.

Robin shook his head. "I didn't have a gun. I couldn't get one in Big Sandy. Maybe he'd 'a' got me if I'd been heeled. 'Tain't finished."

Ivy's sobs broke out afresh. She felt that this clash had come about because of her. And Robin couldn't enlighten her. Outside of himself and her father no one knew what happened that day below Cold Spring, no one knew the motive that was the mainspring of Shining Mark's actions, nor Robin's. Telling wouldn't help. Let them all think the trouble arose over her, until time and chance and effort proved Mark Steele a common thief—if he, Robin, lived that long. And he meant to live.

"I hate him," Ivy wailed. "I'm afraid of him. And still when I'm with him I feel—as if—he could do what he liked with me. I wish he was dead! He'll kill you. He's a wolf—a wolf!"

"Wolves get trapped now an' then," Robin muttered. "Don't you worry about Mark Steele no more, hon. I don't *sabe* why he should make you feel that way if you really like me. Do you really, truly?"

Ivy put her arms around his neck and held up her tear-wet face. "You know I do," she cried passionately. "You're worth all the Mark Steeles that ever wore boots. It's me that's no good. Why should I go crazy because another girl looked at you the way May Sutherland did, if I didn't care? But Robin—say—have you never met with another girl that made you feel—oh, I don't know. As if you'd like to run your fingers in her hair and have her kiss you. You don't really want to, but, but, you think about it. Oh, Robin, Robin, what's the matter with me?"

Robin couldn't answer that except by shaking his head. It hurt him to think of Ivy nursing the least tenderness for anoth-

er man. And still—Robin remembered himself sitting on a hill with May Sutherland, looking off into a sunset. He did not know whether the thing that troubled him was the beauty of evenfall drawing in across a painted sky, or the girl's presence, her physical nearness. Even now, standing with his arms about Ivy, he could not shut out May Sutherland's image. It was there, vivid, alluring. Still May was nothing to him, nor he to her. He was promised to Ivy and he did not desire it to be otherwise.

He shook himself free of these abstractions. Ivy loved him. That was good enough. If Shining Mark could momentarily fascinate her that was something against which he must protect her. Mayne's cattle and Mayne's daughter—who was another man's promised wife. Shining Mark was decidedly a thief. Robin despised him but he did not make the mistake of underestimating Mark's ability in pursuing his desired ends. But for the time——

"Say, hon, I'm famished," he said presently. "No supper. No breakfast. Forget your troubles and rustle me somethin' to eat. Everything's goin' to be all right."

Ivy smiled, kissed him, and flew about the kitchen to prepare him food. She sat beside him while he ate. She promised Robin that she would never be jealous again. She was glad to think that Shining Mark would not again come riding to the ranch. Robin could assure her of that without telling her more than she already knew. He felt that Mark would not risk bearding both himself and Dan Mayne on their own ground.

In the middle of the afternoon Mayne came home.

"By gosh, kid," said he, "I'm scared you'll have to fly the coop. You ain't no match for that jasper. An' Thatcher'll be layin' for you too."

Robin looked off through the haze of Indian summer lying on the creek bottom. The tips of the Little Rockies loomed like a mirage on the eastward horizon. The nearer hills were dun with autumn shades. For a moment he visualized the return of spring, a green world with flowers opening—and himself not there.

"I won't run," he said quietly. "I'll play the hand I've got since I'm in the game."

"What'll you do?" Mayne asked.

"I'll be organized all the time," Robin said briefly.

The old man stuffed his pipe and puffed furiously for a second or two. "Well, maybe we can get a cinch on him," he said hopefully. "I'll take a shoot up to Helena and see if I can't get the Association to put a stock detective down here for a spell. An' we'll have to ride, Robin. I covered some country already. I guess I've gathered as many as forty calves. They've sure cut back lots of unbranded stuff. I bet they've stole five thousand dollars' worth of calves from me in the last year. There's Block S's too. I bet you they throw what they steal across the river when she's froze."

Robin grasped his meaning. The Missouri runs like a broad band across Northern Montana. It was an effective barrier to wandering stock, since range cattle seldom swim unless forced. Only in rare and terrible winter storms did northern cattle move south of that barrier. No one on the south side would think twice about T Bar S stock here and there—unless fresh iron work showed. During the fall and winter when the ice held, Steele and Thatcher could work on unbranded calves and throw them south. More and more Robin wondered why Shining Mark and Thatcher had chosen to kill those cows and brand their calves that day within riding distance of the Bar M Bar. A calculating cow thief, Robin concluded, would take a foolish chance when temptation offered. He had felt safe. Every calf branded was so much to the good. The mere chance of laming a horse by Cold Spring had tipped his hand. If Robin had not crippled Stormy, he would not have suspected Mark Steele of rustling. And now that Mark Steele knew his game was known he was out to offset that whim of chance by making the country too hot for Robin Tyler. Kill him or make him run. It was simple.

Mail for the south hill region came by stage once a week to the ranch near Little Eagle. Robin posted an order for a .45 Colt to a store in Fort Benton. He rode up to mail that letter with a Winchester carbine under his stirrup leather. Robin was fairly sure of his mark with a rifle. He had a good eye and a steady hand. Thereafter the carbine was never far from his reach.

He and old Mayne rode far in the next few days, looking through the twisted and torn confusion of gulch and canyon for calves slipped out of various drives by Shining Mark and his Texan confederate. The days slid by without event. Ivy seemed

happy once more, as if she had forgotten. Sometimes Robin had to stop and assure himself that he hadn't suffered from a waking nightmare, that Shining Mark's sinister activity and all its aftermath were not some sort of evil dream. Once or twice he pulled up on the height of land where he parted that evening from May Sutherland to sit and ponder. He could visualize her so clearly. Then he would shake himself and ride on. There seemed to be a vague disloyalty involved in even thinking of May. Yet he wondered where she was, what she thought. Strangely he never indulged in such speculation about Ivy. He knew Ivy, all her moods and tenses. Once he said to himself whimsically:

"Wonder if everybody sometimes gets wishin' for the moon?"

That was as far as he went along that road.

From the drift of gossip that ebbed and flowed through the Bear Paws, Robin learned, somewhat to his private satisfaction, that he had done Tommy Thatcher an uncommon amount of damage with one stout blow. Tommy had suffered a broken jaw. Incidentally the iron foot-rail had fractured his skull. They had shipped him to a Fort Benton hospital and he would not be about for at least a month. When he did come Robin surmised that he might come shooting. Still, that was no certainty. Tommy might let it ride. In any case what Thatcher might do was less concern to Robin than what Mark Steele would certainly try to do as opportunity offered.

He began practice with the new six-shooter when it came. Riding here and there he would flip it from its scabbard and let fly at a bit of sage, a prairie-dog. He would draw and draw, as a pugilist in training shadow boxes, for speed and certainty, until certain movements became almost automatic. It became a game of skill, like the golf swing. He found himself acquiring a control beyond what he expected when he began.

In a month, during which he burned up forty dollars' worth of ammunition, Robin found himself taking a genuine pleasure in mastery of the weapon. Simply to snap the gun at something on the ground, to see the can or whatever it was, jump in a blob of dust, gave him a peculiar satisfaction. If Shining Mark had never crossed his trail, he reflected, he would never have thought of getting fun out of pistol-practice with a Colt .45. He wondered sometimes if his father, who had been reputed handy with a

gun, had liked to play thus. And if his play had led in the end to using a gun in deadly earnest, to his mother's sorrow? Robin's mother had hated guns. Robin felt a little glad she was not alive to grieve over her son who was following in his father's footsteps—perhaps to the same end. A woman, he reflected, couldn't *sabe*. Ivy didn't understand. Neither did May Sutherland. He doubted if even May knew that while a man might love life dearly, under certain conditions it wasn't worth living—not if a man had to crawl before another to hold life in security.

So he kept his daily practice to himself, and the real purpose of his practice. Meantime, old Dan Mayne made a trip to Helena. When he came back he seemed a little surprised.

"They tell me there's been a stock detective layin' low on this range for six months past," he said. "He ain't reported nothin' yet, so they don't take me serious seein' I couldn't name no names. Jim Bond's the registered owner of the T Bar S all right. He claims it. Looks like the only way I can keep Mark from stealin' me blind is to beat him to everythin' that belongs to me."

So they continued to ride. The school term ended. The two Mayne children came home from the Davis ranch. Robin kept pretty well out of the Bear Paws. He did not go to dances. It irked him a little to know what construction people would place on that. But he had no intention of putting his head in the lion's mouth until he felt he had a chance to blunt the lion's teeth. And Ivy didn't seem to miss dancing—at least, not much.

November brought frost, hard, steel-bright nights. There were flurries of snow but no great storm, only a tightening of the cold grip of winter.

When the first snow whitened the range Robin and old Mayne were in a river bottom forty miles from the Bar M Bar with a pack outfit. Here they picked up a few head of Mayne stock. They drove them out of that bottom into another. In this second flat they rounded up a hundred head of wild cattle. There was a sprinkling of unbranded Block S calves. This was not the first time they had spotted unbranded Sutherland calves in out-of-the-way places.

"He ain't playin' no favorites, is he?" Mayne grunted. "Before spring every one uh these'll be packin' a T Bar S. I wonder if Adam Sutherland is asleep?"

The little herd stood quiet. Robin pointed silently, twice. Each time his finger marked something they had not yet encountered—a T Bar S cow with a big unbranded calf. This was a bunch the round-up had missed altogether. Old Mayne spotted the calves Robin indicated, then jerked the Winchester out from under his stirrup-leather and fired twice. The first T Bar S cow dropped like a stone. The second ran fifty yards and collapsed. The bunch scattered in a panic. Mayne began to undo his rope.

"You get your twine on that other calf," said he.

Robin rode up beside him. "Do you know what you're doin', darn you?" he demanded hotly.

"'Course I know. I'm gittin' back some of my own, by thunder," the old man swore. "You git that calf."

"No," Robin said. "I'm no thief. If you're goin' to get down to Mark Steele's level, I quit you right here and now."

"Hell's fire!" Mayne cried aloud. "Ain't he stole hundreds from me? Ain't I a right to get even?"

"Not this way," Robin persisted stubbornly. "I'll back you in any legitimate play as far as you want to go. But not in this. You've killed those cows and that can't be helped now. But if you mark those calves, I tell you I'm through with anything that has to do with the Bar M Bar."

"You're through anyhow," Mayne raved in fury. "Mark's got you buffaloed. He'll nail your hide to his barn door. I've done this before to T Bar S's, and by the Lord, I'll go on doin' it!"

"You'll do it by yourself, then," said Robin. He swung his horse about. The pack animal grazed a hundred yards distant. Robin rode straight to him. Mayne sat still a second, then followed.

"What you goin' to do?" he demanded harshly.

"Take my blankets and some grub and hit the trail," Robin said. "When it comes to makin' a common thief outa myself, I quit before I begin."

"Aw, hell, kid!" Mayne changed his tone. He began to expostulate.

In the end they rode out of that bottom together taking only Bar M Bar stock. The unbranded T Bar S calves remained with the wild bunch. Mayne grudgingly promised that he

would kill no more cows. He was full of vindictive resentment against everything and everybody. But he didn't want to lose Robin.

"You're so damned straight you lean over backward, kid," he said grudgingly. "Maybe you're right, but I sure don't reckon it no sin to play even thataway when I think of what Mark Steele's doin' to me."

That was Mayne's last long ride. He had grown old in the saddle. He could not face the weariness and discomfort of riding and lying out in bitter weather as lightly as Robin could.

"I guess we got most of mine, anyway," Mayne said. "You can circulate around. I can't stand this no more."

Robin meant to circulate. There were plenty of Block S calves in places he knew. In the back of his mind was a pretty definite idea of what he would do if he ever caught Steele and Thatcher at work. His purpose was hardening. He didn't really expect such luck. They would probably see him first. But there was always the chance.

At no time did Robin see anything of the Block S riders, except one or two casual meetings. Sutherland had a winter line camp, fifty miles or more east, deep in the Bad Lands. While a range boss did in winter occasionally drift about the various camps belonging to his outfit, Robin neither met, saw nor heard of Shining Mark. It seemed indeed as if Christmas might come and go and spring flowers bloom again before the normal round would bring him face to face with his enemy—if the enemy did not take up his trail.

Then one day, Robin, who occasionally spent a night at his own homestead, met Tex Matthews leading a pack horse with bed lashed on, just by his own claim. They stabled their horses, carried the Texan's bed inside, lit a fire in the stove, and sat down to warm their feet.

"Well, kid, how's tricks—the tricks of the trade?" Tex smiled.

"So, so," Robin said. "Nothin' to write home about."

"Thatcher's back," Tex informed him. "I hear him and Steele is down at the Cow Creek camp. Better keep your eye peeled."

"Has he made any cracks?"

"Heard none. But he'll have it in for you. That's a cinch.

By the way," Matthews abruptly changed the subject. "I wonder if old Dan wants another rider?"

"He might," Robin answered. "You ain't quit the Block S?"

"The Block S quit me," Matthews grinned. "Mark let me out a week ago."

"What'd the old man say?" Robin pricked up his ears. Tex had ridden for Sutherland long before Shining Mark joined the outfit.

"He's away. Don't reckon he'd say anything. He never interferes with a range boss."

Robin stared at him.

"I wonder——" he began, and stopped short. He wanted to ask "Why?" Matthews understood. He shrugged his shoulders.

"Mark has ways of his own—and reasons," he remarked indifferently. "It just don't suit him to have me around, I guess."

"Maybe you saw too much."

Tex laughed outright. "You're gettin' to be a regular Sherlock Holmes, kid. I dunno. Maybe he thinks I did. Anyhow, I'm sorta lookin' for a job."

"What you want to work for a one-ring circus like the Bar M Bar for?" Robin asked. "You could ride for any of the big outfits."

"Just a notion. I'd like to ride around with you on this range a spell looking over cut-banks and cow tracks just to see what goes on. Besides—oh, well, I got to work, and I've a notion to work for Mayne."

"Come on down and ask him," Robin counseled. "He's got to put on a rider in the spring anyhow. I couldn't ride with the Block S if I wanted to."

Old Mayne looked at Tex and told him he could consider himself on the payroll forthwith. Later, he asked Robin in an aside: "Reckon we better put Tex wise to Shinin' Mark or leave him find out for himself?"

"I'll wise him up," Robin volunteered. "I have a hunch he don't need much tellin'."

Nor did he. When Robin discreetly broached the subject and related what lay behind Mark Steele's venom, Tex merely grinned. "I figured it somethin' like that," he observed. "Mark's smooth and aggressive. He's got a big swing. Sutherland trusts him to the limit. That's the way old Adam is. If he's with

you he's with you all the way. Still—Mark has made a fatal mistake."

"What?" Robin inquired.

"Hidin' behind another man's ownership of a brand," Tex knitted his brows. "If he'd said to Sutherland: 'I'm goin' to have a few cows of my own an' make a start,' Sutherland would have done one of two things. Either told him straight he couldn't own cattle an' run the Block S at the same time, or he would have said it was a good scheme an' for him to go right to it. But Mark has played it too foxy. If he's rustlin' under the T Bar S brand he owns it, or the biggest share in it. If Sutherland ever finds out his range boss has a silent ownership in a brand on his own range, right there Mark'll come to the end of his rope. Barrin' that, Mark's got all the best of it just now. He's put you in wrong. He'll get you if he can. He can always bluff Dan Mayne. If he wasn't afraid, old Dan would have bellowed it all out loud long ago. There's nothin' but your word against Mark yet. But as a matter of fact, kid, I——"

Tex broke off. He grinned.

"I won't talk, right now," said he. "From now on I'm a Bar M Bar rider. Two heads are better'n one. I can't tell you *all* I may know or think, Robin, old boy. But I'll say this: If you go up against Shinin' Mark too soon an' do kill him, you'll have to go on the dodge, because Sutherland'll sure try to put you in the pen. So you keep clear of a fight with Mark Steele if you can. Maybe by spring you won't have to throw lead with him. Maybe a deputy with a warrant'll save you the trouble."

They slept on that.

CHAPTER XII

THE OPENING GUN

IN BETWEEN the high moments of any man's existence life seems to flow evenly like the placid reaches of a slow stream between foaming rapids. For a time it was like that with Robin. He rose before dawn, performed small tasks, rode abroad more or less perfunctorily during the day. Cattle and horses fed on high ground where the sun warmed them. When night came or harsh winds stung too bitterly they sought shelter in the canyons, in the sparse timber of the foothills. Winter for the range herds was a struggle to survive. In this dumb struggle man had little part. Cattleman and cowboy alike kept to warmed quarters. The range stock attended by their enemies, the blizzard and the prowling wolf, drifted at will until spring.

Probably Tex Matthews and Robin were abroad more than the ordinary business of the range required. They rode partly because old Mayne chafed under an uneasy sense of property rights wantonly violated—partly because they desired of their own accord to overlook nothing. In that wide sweep of plain and rolling hill, wherever that four-legged loot was abroad, there was always a chance to catch Mark Steele red-handed, to get evidence that would convict him before the law which reflected the dominant material interest of the time and territory, inasmuch as it functioned with greater speed and precision in the matter of stolen stock than it ever did in a mere question of human life.

Sometimes Robin, in the kitchen helping Ivy dry the supper dishes or sitting beside her by the rough fireplace in the front room, would wonder if this ugly tangle was quietly unraveling itself—or if this were just a lull.

Since the day they clashed in Big Sandy he had not laid eyes on Shining Mark. From Chase Hill to the mouth of Cow Creek, from Cold Spring to the Missouri he had ridden alert

and watchful, eager to come on the man about his nefarious undertakings. He doubted now that he would. Mark would be well aware that he must step more softly than ever since Tex Matthews rode for Mayne. Yet Mark might be abroad with his running iron in spite of everything.

About three weeks after Tex joined Robin one of the Davis boys rode into Mayne's and stopped for a meal. "There's a dance at the schoolhouse Saturday night," he announced.

"Saturday night?" Robin regarded him intently. "All right. We'll be there with bells on."

They were all looking at him curiously, young Davis, Tex, Ivy, her father, even the two juveniles. Robin felt that he was under fire. "We'll be there," he repeated. "You tell 'em so."

"I won't go," Ivy broke out, after the Davis boy had ridden away. "You know what'll happen. Mark Steele'll be there. Please, Robin! Let's not go."

"I've said I'd go," Robin murmured. "An' I'm sure goin'. I'm not goin' to winter in my hole like a darned badger. I won't start no fuss. If *he* does——"

"We'll all go," Tex put in. "Tommy Thatcher's rangin' around. Better to show 'em you ain't afraid."

So in the end they prevailed over Ivy's fears. And neither Mark Steele nor Tommy Thatcher attended the dance. They danced all night with hearts as light as their heels and rode home in a frosty sunrise. When Robin and Tex drew off their boots in the bunk house to sleep an hour or so Tex said:

"I heard Steele an' Thatcher been in the Cow Creek line camp over a week. We might take a *pasear* that way."

"If they're down there, we better," Robin agreed sleepily. "We'll take a pack outfit down that way to-morrow, maybe."

The morrow found them riding. It might be a fruitless quest but no range man ever caught a cow thief by sitting with his feet to the fire. So they bore away southeast from the Bar M Bar. Noon found them deep in the Bad Lands. Dusk would bring them as near the Block S line camp as they planned to go.

For twenty miles or more north of the Big Muddy and eastward nearly to the Dakota line the Bad Lands spread, grim and desolate. Gouged and ripped and distorted in some past glacial period, it bared itself to the sky in a maze of canyons great and small. Scrub pine timber grew in clumps, thickets,

lodge-pole pine made small forests, wherever roots could find hold and sustenance. Many of these deep gashes were flat-bottomed, threaded by streams of bitter alkali-tainted water. In midsummer it was hot, arid, the haunt and breeding ground of rattlesnakes and wolves. In winter, with snow to serve in place of water, the Bad Lands gave grazing and shelter to tens of thousands of cattle.

To the stranger fresh from a kindlier land it was a lonely, abhorrent place, wrapped in a sinister silence, a maze in which the unwary traveler could lose himself and leave his bones for the coyotes. A rider could get twisted, he could travel for hours and then find himself in a cul-de-sac. He could find himself within shouting distance of another horseman and be compelled to detour fifteen miles if he wished to shake hands.

Yet it was not all desolation. There are oases in the desert, atolls in the widest sea. So in the Bad Lands the wayfarer came unexpectedly on little valleys, small basins, tiny grassed areas surrounding some cold spring. The cow thief, the outlaw, had from time to time made the Bad Lands a sanctuary. Riders faring through that wilderness upon legitimate business came now and then upon an abandoned cabin huddled in a gulch. If it were abandoned to the rats and the weather they looked and rode on. If it showed signs of occupancy they rode on without looking.

Robin and Tex headed for one such place which they had found while on circle two seasons earlier. The curse of the Bad Lands is the ghastly similarity; one gulch, one canyon, one winding plateau is fellow to all the rest. A man needed a most acute sense of location to find his way to any given spot.

The two came at last to a point where uncertainty rested on them. Robin knew he was within a couple of miles of that particular cabin. But in the network of broken land he could not be certain. Nor could Tex. It was all gray, brown, dusky pine-green, far as the eye could reach. The chinook wind had stripped the range of snow. The December wind sighed.

"The hell of this country is that you never can be sure where you are," Robin complained. "I thought that old camp was in the mouth of this gulch. Let's try the next bench."

"Can we follow this one to the river?" Tex wondered when half an hour brought no result.

"Yes, but I'd as soon not make camp in the river bottoms," Robin said.

"I don't suppose it would be good policy," Matthews agreed. "Let's camp the first water we strike."

Robin nodded. They bore down a ridge that seemed to offer access to low ground, out of that biting wind. The point of this spur ran suddenly out into a circular depression. It was like a meadow surrounded by a deep fringe of jack pine. They reined up in the belt of timber and stood to gaze.

A round corral stood in the middle of this flat. A long wing ran from one side of the bars—a typical pen for wild stock.

"Never saw *this* before?" Robin lowered his voice.

"Don't know as you better see too much of it right now," Tex murmured. "This here looks like strictly private premises to me. There'll be a cabin an' water handy. Maybe likewise some jasper with a Winchester."

"Let's look her over anyhow," Robin suggested.

"Do the lookin' afoot, then," Tex counseled. "I wish there was snow. Tracks would tell."

They were well hidden by the timber in which they had pulled up. They tied their horses in the grove. Carbines in hand they began to encircle this small basin. On the farther side where a low place pitched out of the flat toward a gloomy canyon they found a pole cabin by a small clear spring. They stared silently from a thicket of chokecherry. To their right loomed the roof of another shelter. There was no sign of life.

"Let's go clean around and take a look for tracks," Tex whispered. "Then we can ride up an' investigate this here secluded dwellin'."

They did so, returned to their horses, satisfied that the flat harbored no life. They mounted, rode across the open, pulled up beside the corral.

"She's been used recent." Robin pointed to fresh cattle-signs. His roving eye lit on fresh charred wood. "Been some iron work."

Tex nodded. That hidden place, the fire-sign, the trampled floor of the corral told a definite story. No range rider needed pictures to illustrate that tale.

They rode on to the cabins. By the spring where the earth was moist they found fresh horse tracks, shod horses, leading

in and out. Tex squinted at the ground. "That was yesterday," he stated. "Let's see how the shack is fixed for use."

Looking first into the brush-hidden building they discovered it to be larger than it looked. It was a stable with room for two horses and all the rest of the space in one end packed with hay, bunch grass cut with a sickle. The marks of the haying were plain on the nearby sward. They grinned at each other and walked over to the house.

A pile of fresh-cut wood beside a stone fireplace. A single bunk in each of two corners, filled with pine needles pressed to the shape of a man's body. The earthen floor marked by the pointed heels of riding boots. They went outside.

"I wonder what she spells?" Tex murmured.

"We might find out." Robin smiled. "Maybe this is where Mark an' Thatcher are gettin' in some good licks on the Block S. I'd sure like to know."

But it was not on the cards that Robin should learn what he wanted to know in the immediate future. They had ridden far. It was a cold day and night would be colder. Finding the cabin they sought in that network of canyons was a slim chance now. Only those who haunted the Bad Lands could say where each meadow and deserted cabin stood. Even they might not always find such spots as they sought.

"We might have passed within a hundred yards of this more'n once an' never seen it," Tex remarked. "I'd say this building was done last year. Funny none of our riders come on it. The Pool worked this country last spring, too."

"There aren't ten men in Montana," Robin said, "that know every hole in the Bad Lands. Likely enough," he snorted, "Shinin' Mark would lead a circle right past here, wouldn't he?"

"It's a right good spot," Tex drawled. "Halfway between Boiler Bottom an' Cow Island. Yeah—for stuff that was missed in the breaks on round-up——"

"There was some missed, I rise to remark," said Robin. "Between me an' Mayne I guess we've spotted two hundred Block S calves unbranded. Most of 'em range within fifteen miles of this corral. This place was made to order for them that's draggin' the long rope."

"Well, do we stay here, or do we make camp in the next likely place we strike?" Tex inquired.

"I wouldn't sleep good if I stayed here," Robin smiled. "I don't want to hang around this place. I'm goin' to spot it so I can find it again, though. We sure want to cast our gaze on this from time to time to see what goes on."

"You're shoutin'," Tex grinned.

They rode down the draw from the spring, each striving to fix in his mind the contours of the surrounding landscape. They took bearings on the ragged peaks of the Bear Paws in the northwest. And they watched closely the lay of the land.

The draw closed to a narrow gulch. That fell away steeply into a canyon bottom. A good many cattle grazed on those flats. This narrow valley came in from the south. They judged that it offered a continuous route to the Missouri, if it was not actually a fork of Cow Creek. Below them the canyon took a sharp turn to the east. Opposite this point a gorge came down from the high benches. Its mouth was cluttered by pine and cottonwoods. There would be shelter there and firewood, probably water. They discussed the making of a night camp.

As they came abreast of the cottonwoods Matthews, riding knee to knee with Robin, straightened stiffly in his saddle, put one hand to his breast. Robin saw the action, the strange look of surprise and pain. At the same moment something plucked sharply at the leather band of Robin's chaps—and he heard two clear cracks somewhat muffled in the distance.

Thought, vision, the registering of an auditory impression—all three were instantaneous. So was action. Being fired upon they did not stand to gape. Their horses spun on shod heels. A hundred yards away the dry bed of the creek was cut ten feet below the surface of the valley floor. Into this they plunged.

Once in the wash Robin jerked the carbine from under his leg, flung out of his saddle. With the bank for a breastwork he meant to fight, not run. A sidelong glance as he turned showed him Tex drooping over his saddle horn. Robin stepped back. His heart sank. He knew the signs.

"Ride, kid," Tex whispered. "They've got me good!"

Robin caught him as he slid down. In an agony of sorrow and rage Robin looked once, bent to see the glaze gathering over the Texan's blue eyes. Then he leaped to the edge of the bank. Lying flat with his rifle thrust out before him he waited for the assassins to follow up their advantage.

CHAPTER XIII

CORNERED

TEN days from the evening Tex Matthews died in the frozen bed of a lonely creek Robin rode again in the Bad Lands, this time alone. No one knew whither he went, nor why. He scarcely knew himself. If he could have embodied his feelings in words he would have said that he could not rest quietly under circumstances that drew about him like the crushing coil of a python. Sometimes a curious fear stirred in his heart, and again—when he thought of Tex—a resentful ache. His world was all askew. There was no faith nor honor nor even justice. Thieves flourished and murder went unchallenged.

"Shot to death by some person or persons unknown."

That perfunctory verdict echoed in Robin's ears like a damnable irony as he pulled up his horse once more in the pines which bounded the corral and cabins he and Tex had discovered. Robin knew those "persons unknown." But a moral certainty does not establish guilt before the law.

He shivered a little, recalling that day and hour. He had lain on the edge of the washout with a dead man below him and he had prayed that the killers would show themselves. But nothing save a few cattle startled by the shots moved in that lonely place. He had lain until his body grew stiff with the cold, until the dark shut down. Then he had lashed the Texan's corpse across his saddle and groped his way out of the Bad Lands, leading a tired horse with a ghastly burden that had been a man.

Here he was again, urged against all reasoned judgment into the enemy's territory. He had no plan. He trusted to luck. If only he could get something definite to go on—or better still if he could drop those two red-handed in their preda-

tory activities. Given a crew of riders and two weeks Robin knew that a round-up of T Bar S cattle would show that their number had trebled in a twelvemonth. Nothing less than positive proof would shake Adam Sutherland's fatuous belief in the integrity of his range boss.

Probably, in the end, Robin thought, he would have to kill Mark Steele—if Mark didn't beat him to that outcome. Perhaps deep in Robin's breast lurked the savage desire to stake all on an encounter and so end uncertainty. A man cannot always fathom his own motives. Still, in spite of the indignities Shining Mark had heaped upon him, Robin was not there for bushwhacking, but to learn if indeed Thatcher and Steele did use that lonely corral and for what purpose.

He viewed it now from the concealment of the timber. A three-inch layer of new snow blanketed the earth. No track led in or out from the place. Robin turned away and bore off toward the river.

He made camp in a gulch at dusk. During the next day he jogged in and out of various bottoms, flats in which both with Mayne and Tex he had noted scores of Block S cows with their unbranded calves. The cows were there still. The calves were gone. The clean-up had been made. But where were the calves? Robin stared across the frozen reach of the Missouri and guessed the answer. He marked herd after herd of grazing cattle with never a sign of fresh iron work, nor a single unbranded calf. He would rest his hands on his saddle horn and ponder. Where would *he* dispose of fresh branded yearlings if he were a cow thief.

Psychology to Robin was no more than a term occasionally encountered in his last year of a frontier grammar school. But he knew his people and his time. And he had imagination. He could put himself in another man's shoes.

So he looked south of the river. In the end he crossed, leading a trembling horse that slipped and slid and once or twice fell on the glaring ice.

From far below Boiler Bottom he rode westward on the Judith Basin side, in a region where no man lived. He rode in still, wide-floored canyons where cattle grazed, over benches, back to the river flats again, looking, looking. He ate the last of his food. He slept like a wild animal in the lee of a

bank. And he came out at last near the mouth of the Judith River opposite where Birch Creek flowed in from the Bear Paws.

He was hungry and weary. The frost had touched his cheeks. The range lay hard and wan under a bright moon, and glittered in the midday sun. But Robin was content to endure. He had found much that he desired to find. If he could only establish Mark Steele's interest in the T Bar S brand he knew he could make good his word and put Mark Steele in the penitentiary.

Thus Robin as he looked to the homeward side of the big river. In all the jumbled area behind him no man rode in the dead of winter. The Judith Basin cow outfits had their home ranches far south in a creek and meadow country. The cattle that ranged where he had been would see no riders before the spring round-up. The PN on the Judith a few miles above was the only habitation within a hard day's ride of where he stood—south of the river. Robin was tempted to ride to the PN to eat warm food, to sleep in a bed once more.

But there was also the urge for home. Directly across from him a little way up Birch the Block S had a line camp. Two riders held it down. Robin knew both riders stationed there. He could lie over an hour, get something to eat, reach home by dark. His mouth watered at the mere thought of hot coffee.

The chance of Shining Mark turning up there was remote. Robin knew why Mark and Thatcher kept to the lower end of the Block S range. In any case, as he rode up Birch Creek, he must pass this camp. And he would never again step aside an inch for Mark Steele or any other man. Something of the hardness of the winter frosts seemed to be creeping into Robin's soul.

An hour later he came to a cabin and a stable in one corner of a small pasture fenced with poles. Smoke wavered from a pipe. Two saddled horses stood before the door. A head thrust out as Robin drew rein.

"Hello, cowboy," Ed Doyle greeted. "You lost, or just goin' some place?"

"Neither," Robin returned. "Been some place, that's all."

"Well, get down an' rest your saddle," Doyle invited.

Robin got stiffly down. Doyle's red-headed companion took

a shrewd look at Robin and his mount.

"Better put that *caballo* in the stable so he can eat as well as you," he said. "You look like you'd been 'round the Horn."

"Mark Steele ain't floatin' around by any chance, is he?"

A brief glance telegraphed between the two Block S men. Robin could interpret that. They thought he was out for Steele.

"Naw," Bud Cartwright said. "You'd be more likely to locate him down around Cow Creek from what I hear."

"I sure don't hanker to locate him right now," Robin smiled. "I'd rather locate a cup of hot coffee than anything I know."

"Got your order," Bud grinned. "She's still steamin' on the stove. There's biscuits and a hunk of fried beef. Fly at it, Robin. We're fed. Got to take a swing over toward Chip Creek. Make yourself at home."

Robin stabled his mount. When he came back to the house the other two were in the saddle.

"We'll be back somewhere between now an' dark," Doyle said. "Keep the fire goin', kid."

"I will if I stay," Robin agreed. "Kinda like to get home. See how I feel after I've got some grub under my belt."

"Well, the house is yours," Bud drawled. "So long."

Robin stirred up the fire, ate like a famished wolf. He was weary to the innermost core. For five days he had only taken off his boots to warm his feet for an hour or so by the fire. With a full stomach he drew up to the stove, rested his stockinged feet on the hearth, sat there smoking, debating whether he should stay or ride on.

The warmth of the room wrapped him like a comfortable garment. His eyelids drooped. His chin sank on his breast.

He came out of that doze with a strange intuition of a presence in the room besides himself. He became aware of his pistol scabbard empty on his hip. For a breath he tried to recall if he had laid the gun aside. Then, his head turning slowly to verify that warning intuition of personal nearness to something, he saw Mark Steele and Thatcher standing between him and the door.

Steele had Robin's Colt in his hand. He was smiling, with a faint curl of his upper lip. Thatcher grinned with a satisfaction that sent a ripple along Robin's back.

He looked at them silently. They had him cornered, disarmed. What would they do? He canvassed the possibilities in a detached fashion.

Steele broke the silence at last. He backed up a step, seated himself on the edge of the table. His eyes never left Robin. They were cold and gray. He laid Robin's six-shooter beside him.

"Well, Mr. Tyler of the Bar M Bar," said he, "the last time we talked you said you were goin' to put me in the pen. You got out a warrant for my arrest yet?"

Robin did not answer.

"Too scared to talk?" Steele taunted.

Robin's answer was a shrug of his shoulders. A shadow flitted across Steele's dark face.

"I'll make you talk," he gritted. "Here, Tommy, you take the horses to the stable," he ordered. "Unsaddle 'em. Shut the door when you go out, so the cold air won't bother Mr. Tyler. His feet are chilly now."

Thatcher glanced from Robin to Steele. He seemed uncertain. But he went out without a word.

"Now, darn your hide," Mark's tone was acid. "I hate to mess up a nice clean cabin, but you've bothered me long enough." His fingers closed on the grip of his belt gun. "You've bothered me long enough. You hear me?"

Through Robin's mind flashed the thought that deadly as Steele was he could not quite cold-bloodedly shoot down a man who sat in a chair. Mark had to stir him up—or work himself up. Robin faced slowly about on the chair.

"I hear you," he said quietly. "Go ahead, shoot. You'll be proud of yourself after you've put out my light. You're a powerful brave man, Steele."

Robin said that casually, for all his heart was beating double-quick. Whether he rose to Steele's taunting or not the man would kill him. Intention, determination, were explicit on Shining Mark's face, in his stony stare, the slow withdrawal of his gun from its scabbard. Robin was a menace Steele must remove for his own safety. That cold feeling went over Robin again in a wave.

But all the time his stockinged toes were pressing harder and harder into the dirt floor, the muscles of his legs were

tensing. At least he would not die like a tame sheep, bleating for mercy where there was no mercy.

And when the gun leaped clear with a sudden jerk, Robin leaped also.

Shining Mark had made the mistake of staying too close. Robin did not strike. He clutched with both hands for that gun, thrust it aside. For a few seconds they struggled. Robin clamped both hands over the gun, turning it back on Mark, jammed him against the wall. He was the heavier, the stronger of the two, but he could not tear loose the weapon from Steele's grip. To loose one hand and strike was dangerous. Any moment Thatcher might enter. Then of a surety he was a dead man. And it was more fitting Robin felt, with a fury that burned him, that Steele or Thatcher, or both, should die if death was to stalk in that camp.

Slowly he turned the muzzle back toward Steele. One of his fingers slipped inside the trigger guard. His thumb hooked around the curved hammer. He jabbed Steele suddenly with one knee, and in the momentary relaxation of the man's grip Robin managed to pull the trigger.

The report of the .45 was like a cannon blast in the room. Shining Mark let go, left the gun in Robin's hand. His fingers fumbled at the base of his throat. Then he sagged and weaved and his knees doubled under him. He became a sprawling figure face to the floor, with strange spasmodic twitching of his outstretched fingers.

Robin retrieved his own gun. His rifle stood by the wall. He picked the Winchester up. There was still another snake to scotch. Like a wolf at bay pure savagery was driving Robin now. He opened the door. For the moment, rifle in hand, with that dark rage upon him, Robin would have faced all the fiends of hell itself—and Thatcher was only a man.

The Texan was walking rapidly toward the house. In Robin's seething brain the thought arose: "They knew I was here. They followed me. He thinks Mark has downed me."

He stepped, scarcely conscious of his stocking feet, out into the snow. As the foresight of his rifle lined on the Texan's breast, Thatcher stopped dead in his tracks, flung both arms high in the air. Robin held his fire. He walked toward the Texan, the anger dying out of him like a receding tide. But

for all that he cursed the man, disarmed him and drove him into the house. Thatcher grew pale at sight of his confederate stretched on the floor.

Then Robin stood still to collect his thoughts. He beheld himself yet between the devil and the deep sea. He had killed the Block S wagon boss as he had publicly declared he would. Adam Sutherland would remember that.

"Turn your face to the wall," he commanded Thatcher.

"Kid, for God's sake!"

"You dirty dog!" Robin gritted. "*I* don't murder men from ambush, nor shoot 'em in the back. You do what I say."

Thatcher obeyed. Robin took a piece of clothesline and tied his wrists tightly, backed him up to a bunk nailed to the wall and lashed him securely to a corner of that. Then he put on his boots, his overcoat, took both their guns and shut the cabin door on the prisoner and the dead.

He saddled his own horse, turned out the other two, hastened their going with a flicking rope-end. In half an hour he would be on the high benches. Until Bud Cartwright and Ed Doyle returned he was safe from pursuit. He knew Doyle and Cartwright. They would not hasten to sound an alarm over any one killing Shining Mark.

He mounted and loped away up Birch Creek straight for the Bar M Bar.

CHAPTER XIV

THE LINE OF LEAST RESISTANCE

DARK had fallen. The winter night was setting its teeth hard when Robin dismounted in the Mayne yard. He had forgotten about being tired. His brain had kept a strange sort of time to the drum of hoofs on the frozen ground. He couldn't make a decision. His instinct was to stand his ground. Yet he knew the risk of that. Sutherland would be implacable. Both publicly and privately he was strong for law and order, set against feuds. He would never believe that Mark Steele had forced the issue. He would say he meant to see justice done when in reality he would be seeking revenge on an alien rider who had killed one of his trusted men.

Robin held his decision until he could talk with Dan Mayne. Red Mike stood in a stall. He stood a moment to pat the red horse's glossy hide, thinking that he hated to run. He had been afraid and he was no longer afraid. Robin had never heard a champion pugilist's dictum that "the bigger they are the harder they fall," but that was in essence how he felt now. Only as a reward for proving that truth to himself, he did not wish to wear a striped government suit and enjoy free lodging in state quarters for an indefinite period. Adam Sutherland was powerful enough in Choteau county to inflict that penalty on him.

He walked into the house. Mayne sat by the fireplace sucking his pipe. Ivy came to meet him.

"I'm empty as a last year's water barrel," he said to her. "Get me some supper, will you, hon?"

"Where on earth have you been all this time in this kind of weather?" Ivy stayed to ask.

"Oh, every place," Robin put her off. "Go on, old girl. I'm starved."

Ivy went into the kitchen.

"Steele jumped me this afternoon down at the Birch Creek line camp. I killed him," Robin said bluntly.

Mayne took his pipe out of his mouth. For a second he looked incredulous. Then fear crossed his face.

"Good Lord!" he breathed. "The fat'll be in the fire now. The Block S'll be on us like a bunch of wolves."

"On us?" Robin queried. "How? Where do you come in? I did the killin'."

"How?" Mayne echoed. He rose to his feet. "Hell, I know Sutherland. He'll make this range too hot to hold me. He thought the sun rose an' set around that —— —— ——!"

He spat a mouthful of epithets on the dead man. Robin stared at Mayne with a little heart sinking. This was the reward for loyalty. Mayne saw only his material interests further imperiled by the inevitable dénouement. It came over Robin with a discouraging conviction that for all he was in a way of becoming Mayne's son he could expect little backing in this crisis. Mayne had been furious at Shining Mark's depredations. Shining Mark would rustle no more Bar M Bar calves. But Mayne had a new fear—Sutherland's anger. The Block S could blackball him, refuse to handle his stock, throttle him in a dozen ways.

Something like contempt stirred briefly in Robin.

"I don't see where you need worry," he said.

Perhaps his tone brought Mayne back to a consideration of immediate consequences.

"You'll have to jump out, I guess," said he. "Sutherland'll get you buried for life if you stand trial, no matter how good a defence you got. How'd the play come up?"

Robin told him briefly. The old man listened, shaking his head. "You ain't got a chance in the world, unless you could prove Mark was actually stealin'," he gave his opinion. "Thatcher'll swear black is white an' white's no color at all. Gosh, Robin, I wish you hadn't got Steele."

"If I'd 'a' known you'd back water in a pinch maybe I wouldn't," Robin said slowly. "He didn't steal my calves. I could 'a' let it slide. I could 'a' told Shinin' Mark I was deaf, dumb, an' blind about what went on on this range, and he would have left me alone. You're a poor stick, Mayne."

"I ain't either. I'm as game as the next," Mayne retorted.

"But I can go broke on lawyers an' witnesses a whole lot quicker than Adam Sutherland. It's all right for you wild kids to rip an' tear regardless. It's took me thirty years to collect a thousand head of cattle an' a home."

He strode up and down the bare floor mumbling to himself. Robin sat thinking. He would have to go on the dodge. Mayne was frightened. He could see that. The old man wanted only to wash his hands of the whole business.

Ivy came in, looked from one to the other.

"What's wrong now?" she demanded. "Somethin' is."

"This crazy kid has gone an' killed Mark Steele," Mayne flared up. "We're tryin' to figure what he'd better do."

"I'll do my own figurin'," Robin said tartly. He had already made up his mind. "I'm goin' to eat an' ride. You can rest easy. I won't mix you up in no big trial."

Ivy stood as if petrified. When Robin put out his hand to her she shrank.

"So—oh," he breathed. "It jars you like that, does it?" and walked past her into the kitchen.

His food was on the table. He set himself to eat. It might be a long stretch between meals, he thought grimly. He had no more regret than he would have had at crushing a snake's ugly head under his boot heel. But he quivered inside. He had played the game. Because he had played a desperate trump to take the winning trick, he must lose. He felt that. Mayne most of all feared for his security as a little cowman tolerated in the heart of a cattle king's domain. Ivy—he couldn't make her out. Something seemed to be slowly freezing inside Robin.

Ivy came out of the other room at last and stood looking at him as he rolled a cigarette and lit it, nursing his chin in one palm as he blew smoke.

"It's awful, Robin," she sighed. "I wish I'd never gone to that dance. What'll you do?"

"Hit the trail," he answered.

Ivy stood still. She seemed deep in some consideration which had, Robin felt forlornly, little to do with him.

"Will you go with me?" Some obscure impulse prompted the question. "I might never come back."

"Oh, I couldn't do that," she whispered.

Then she flung herself at Robin, clung to him. She buried her face in his shoulder, shaking with sobs.

"Oh, it's awful, Robin," she cried. "I can't bear it."

"Can't bear what?" Robin asked.

He had no key to her mood. He couldn't tell whether her grief was for him or Mark or for herself, or whether this tragedy in which she was involved simply oppressed her beyond endurance. He knew no way to comfort her. For a moment he thought of explaining that this trouble had arisen simply because Mark Steele was a thief trying to cover his trail. But it was a little late for explanation which did not alter facts. They had never told Ivy the real truth. And Mark was dead. It didn't matter now.

She withdrew from his arms and began nervously to gather up dishes. Robin watched her for a minute. Some sort of impalpable barrier was between them. Nothing he could say or do would make it any different.

"Well, I got to get organized," he said and rose. Old Mayne appeared in the doorway.

"What you aim to do?" he inquired uneasily. "Stand pat, or light out?"

"What you think yourself?" Robin asked. It was an idle question. He knew what he would do. He was only curious to know what Mayne really wanted him to do.

"If it was anybody but Sutherland you might come clear," Mayne grumbled. "With the Block S pullin' the strings you'll get manslaughter sure as blazes."

"Suppose I stand trial and get a year, or two, or ten?" Robin went on. "Where'll I be at with you two when I come out?"

Mayne glanced at his daughter, wet his lips with the tip of his tongue. The girl stood silent. Robin looked from one to the other. A faint sardonic smile fluttered about his lips.

"You got a home here anytime you come back," Mayne said. "You know that."

There was no warmth in the assurance. Robin felt that when he had ridden out into the night something like relief would be the most definite sensation in the agitated breasts of these two.

"Well, you don't need to worry," he said at last. "I'm not goin' to stand arrest. Chances are if they send a deputy sheriff after me he'll ride careful, prayin' to God he don't come on me.

There's a lot of territory between here an' Texas where a man can make a fresh start."

He walked out without waiting for an answer. Mayne followed with a lantern. Robin saddled Red Mike, led him out and dropped the reins at the bunk house door. There were a few odds and ends he wanted, clothes he would need. In twenty minutes he was ready, rifle slung under his stirrup leather, a hundred rounds of ammunition belted on, his clothes in a war bag across his saddle. He turned with his hand on the stirrup and walked back to the house. He couldn't leave Ivy like that. He was sick inside, but he couldn't go without a word. "I'm gone to the wild bunch, hon," he put his arms around her.

Ivy sobbed afresh, repeating that senseless "Oh, it's awful," over and over until Robin stopped her mouth with a kiss that brought no answering pressure from her cold lips.

"I'm gone," he said briefly. "You want me to come back?"

"I don't want you to go," she cried.

"I got to."

"I guess so. All right," she seemed to collect herself. "Write to me Robin, an' tell me how you make out."

"I'll get word to you," he promised. "Good-by."

Within ten minutes he drew up at his own door. He came near passing the dimly outlined cabin with a glance and a sigh, but he recalled some papers he thought wise to take and so dismounted. He struck a match, got what he wanted out of a tin box on a shelf, and rode on.

The moon was still below the horizon. Robin pointed Red Mike's nose straight for the Block S home ranch and rode fast. The point he bore for lay straight across the Bear Paws where the Montana Central branched off the main line of the Great Northern. He could go in three directions from there. He would be on a train before word of that killing reached the Block S.

He had an idea that pursuit and search would be perfunctory until Adam Sutherland stirred up the county authorities. Even if Thatcher or one of the others took horse and rode they could cover ground no faster than he. He would beat them to the railroad by hours. After that they would look for him anywhere but on a train. And Robin meant in that hour to turn his back forever on the range and cattle and cow thieves. He

rode over the high, moon-washed divide of the Bear Paws in snow three feet deep, with a definite purpose and destination in mind. A clean break! A new country. Everything behind him severed.

From the Bar M Bar to Havre Junction was a little over forty miles in an air line. Robin dismounted in the outskirts of the little town at three P.M., having ridden the distance in six hours. He stood patting Red Mike's sweaty neck while the beast nuzzled him impatiently.

"So long, old boy," he whispered. "I hope nobody grabs you just because they know I've quit the country."

Red Mike rolled in the snow, shook himself like a dog, ambled away. In three or four days he would be grazing with the wild horses on Chase Hill. Robin watched him go with a little pang. Then he took his saddle on his shoulder and passed along a dark street until he found a livery stable with a sleepy hostler whom he roused off a cot in the office.

"I want to leave this saddle here for a spell," he said.

"All right. Chuck her in the harness room," the man said. "Gee whiz, I'm sleepy! I'm going to pound my ear again."

Robin gained the railroad station without meeting a soul. He was going where he would not need a saddle. If he didn't come back to claim it, no matter.

In a dim corner of the empty waiting-room he changed to his good suit and plain shoes. Then he sat down to await the west-bound passenger.

This train would go through Big Sandy at six o'clock. There was little likelihood of any one there knowing that Mark Steele had passed out of the picture. No one would dream of Robin Tyler riding boldly west on the Montana Central through Sutherland's home town. If he could get past Fort Benton and Helena without being recognized he was safe. Sheriffs had duties enough at home without going far afield for trouble. The survivor of a private war who quietly left for parts unknown was seldom troubled by the authorities in a distant state.

Robin banked on that. He would go far and he would never come back. Sitting in that dimly lit room he felt no fear of consequences, no pang of remorse, only a strange touch of sadness. He hadn't wanted it to be that way. Six months earlier he had looked forward confidently to a future in the shadow of the

Bear Paws, a future that comprised round-up and wild riding, a bunch of cattle of his own, a home on Little Birch—and Ivy to make that home bright. Life had been pleasantly compounded of hope and ambition and love, the regard of his fellows and a singular sense of oneness with his environment.

He shook himself out of this brooding. It made him ache. It was done, finished. He might drift eventually to other cattle ranges but he would never ride the Bear Paws again, he would never sit on Chase Hill at sundown and watch the afterglow rose-pink on Old Centennial.

And he would not listen again to May Sutherland's throaty voice. Robin was conscious enough of his mental processes to wonder why he thought of May Sutherland now instead of Ivy, why the image of the one who had wept bitter tears on his shoulder six hours ago grew obscured by a sharp-cut vision of the other sitting on a sorrel horse looking wide-eyed into the west where the plains rolled like the sea.

May would have understood how a man might be caught in a vicious circle and forced to play the only card he held. He doubted if Ivy did.

Anyway, it didn't matter, Robin assured himself morosely. Neither woman could count for much now. Before long there might literally be a price on his head.

He kept his face to the window on the opposite side of the car when the train hauled up at Big Sandy station. Dawn was breaking when the Fort Benton stop came. Beyond Fort Benton Robin breathed easier. Once the train passed Great Falls he shook off his wariness. He was in a new country already and the lure of the unknown began to exert its spell.

Robin was for the far Pacific which he had never seen. He knew that no one would dream of a cow-puncher with a killing behind him planting his stakes on Puget Sound. He had bought a ticket on the train. As that read, Helena was his destination. Helena was at once the state capital and the winter rendezvous and residence of many cattlemen, Sutherland among them. On any street corner he might meet a man he knew. So Robin kept on to Butte. He could make a detour and get back on the main line at a junction west of the continental divide.

Thus he avoided a stop in the last place where he might be recognized. Twelve hours later he was forging along the Hell

Gate river, the Rockies behind him, the world ahead of him, a ticket to Seattle and three hundred dollars in his pocket.

The sun blazed in the car windows. Robin with his nose to a pane reflected that it might be worse. They might be burying him instead of Shining Mark. And when a man died he was a long time dead. Thus he comforted himself as the train rolled west. A porter sonorously announcing luncheon reminded Robin that hunger could be appeased in the dining car. He brushed his hair and followed the porter.

In the second Pullman to the rear he brought up in the doorway with a start. Three seats ahead, facing him wide-eyed with surprise, sat May Sutherland. A broad pair of shoulders surmounted by a thick red neck informed him that Adam Sutherland was her vis-a-vis. For a moment Robin's eyes met the girl's inquiring stare. Then he swung on his heel and went back to his seat. There would be no food for him in that dining car. He did not dare run the gauntlet.

For an hour Robin chafed in his seat. Here were both disturbance and danger. If Adam Sutherland laid eyes on him! By now the owner of the Block S must have been informed of what had befallen Mark Steele.

Robin looked up from these reflections to find May at his elbow, smiling uncertainly. He rose. For the life of him he could not help a slightly apprehensive glance past her. She deemed to divine his thought.

"Dad's having a smoke back in the observation," she said.

"Will you sit down a minute?" Robin bethought himself of courtesy. May slipped into the seat facing him.

"What has happened?" she asked quietly.

Robin stared. Either she knew what had happened, or her intuition was uncanny. What difference did it make to her?

"How do you know anything has happened?" he countered.

"I don't *know*," she replied slowly. "But I have that sort of feeling. When you came to our car and turned back. Perhaps it was that. I don't know."

Robin's mind worked fast. If word had reached Adam Sutherland and Sutherland discovered he was on that train, old Adam would have an officer at his elbow between stations. He doubted if May would mention his presence. Yet she might. She *was* frank. But if he asked her not to mention him she

wouldn't—only he would have to tell her why. And why not? He remembered with a queer glow that she had said: "If there is to be a funeral I hope it will be *his.*"

"I'm on the dodge," he said quietly. "Mark Steele jumped me day before yesterday. I killed him. That's why I backed out of your car. I didn't want your dad to see me. I'm quittin' Montana for good."

He put his hands on his knees and faced her impassively. A little gleam of admiration warmed him. She neither winced nor looked shocked nor did any of the things a woman might reasonably be expected to do when a man calmly informs her that he has taken another man's life.

"Somehow, I don't seem to be surprised much," she murmured at last. "I suppose he crowded you into a corner. But do you have to run? Haven't you a plea of defense?"

"Not much, as it stands. You see Steele kept diggin' into me all fall. He wanted me to jump him so that he could kill me. He drove me crazy that day in Big Sandy. I said before twenty men that I'd kill him. The kind of lawyers and the kind of witnesses that would be against me in a trial would cook my goose. This Thatcher was there. He'll have his own story. He's just as keen to put me away as Shinin' Mark was. All things considered I can't stand trial. I was born free," he ended a little wistfully, "I've lived free and I aim to die that way. I won't take no chance on lookin' through bars like a caged wolf for doin' somethin' that was forced on me."

"There is more than Ivy Mayne back of this," May said slowly. There was a peculiar sort of conviction in her tone.

"Yes," Robin admitted. "But it don't do no good to talk about that now. Too late."

May rose. "I must go back," she said. "We are on our way to visit friends. We get off at Missoula. Is there any message I can take back to—to any one, when I go home in the spring." Robin shook his head. "Remember me to the hills when you go ridin'," he muttered. "That's all."

The girl's eyes clouded.

"I'm sorry," she whispered, and held out her hand. "Good-by, Robin Tyler—and good luck to you." Robin turned his face to the frosted window. A lump in his throat grew and swelled till it seemed as if it would choke him.

CHAPTER XV

ECHOES FROM AFAR

SITTING on a pierhead jutting from the Seattle water front one Sunday afternoon in April Robin surrendered himself to a mood that he had been choking down all winter.

Materially he had done well enough. He had sought sanctuary in this seaport city and found what he sought. He had walked the streets with an assurance that he was lost in the swarming ant heap. So far as Montana, the Block S, those far wide ranges went, he had ceased to be. And since he had not come there seeking glory and fortune by the white-collar route he had soon found work that he could do and for which he was well paid.

But he didn't fit. He was an alien in an alien land. Even now the lessened rumble of Sunday traffic beat on his brain, a faint distasteful sound, which in midweek roar annoyed and irritated him with its clang of complicated machinery, its feverish scurrying of crowds—there seemed no more purpose in this medley of unrest than there was in the senseless milling of a herd—except that the human herd went surging this way and that under the pressure of invisible riders of necessity.

Here on this April afternoon the sun shone on rippling water at his feet. The surrounding hills and Sound islands all washed clean by drenching rain were bright with spring growth. For weeks, for months, Robin had lived and moved under the gloom of murky skies, great clouds that wept eternal tears. He had shivered on his wagon in damp fogs carrying a chill like the clammy hands of death. The sun was lost in that gloom. It was all gray, gray sky, gray streets, gray sea. Sometimes the very soul in him turned gray.

He was too far from all that he had known and cared about. Voluntary exile he might have endured with better grace, know-

ing that he could return if he wished. But he could not go back. If he could not go back to places and things he knew he did not care where he went.

So chafing, he could not fit himself in here. Sometimes he said to himself that it was all in his mind, that men and women, work and pleasure were the same anywhere. Only he couldn't make that a reality for himself in Seattle. Such pleasures as he sought only made him sad. Life flowed about him in a surging stream and he was like a chip in the swirls. He had laid that feeling of loneliness, that depressing sense of isolation, to being a stranger, to living under a sodden, weeping sky that never cleared to let him see the blue. He had never known anything but brightness, air that was crystal clear, a look that swept to a far horizon. Here the eyes were in a prison, shut in by streets like canyons, miles of houses monotonously alike, dark dripping forests that began where the last suburban cottages lifted among the raw stumps where logging outfits had taken their toll of the great trees.

Robin had said to himself that when he knew people, when spring came, it would be different. It *was* different. But the difference took the form of a more acute nostalgia. Robin had never wandered among the poets, but he knew spring fever and he was learning the meaning of homesickness.

He turned now to face the city rising above him in terraced avenues. Smoke from ten thousand chimneys cast a haze against the soft blue sky. The rustle and noise and confusion had stilled a little, though not wholly, on this day of rest. There was a transient hush along the water front. An atmospheric beauty hovered upon the Sound. The Olympics stood out blue toward the Strait of Juan de Fuca. Yet the city faced Robin like a maelstrom from which he desired to be afar. He was sick with a subtle sorrow. The medicine to cure him was a good horse between his legs, a look from some high ridge out over a hundred miles of grassland all green now and sprinkled with blue windflowers. There would be mountains in the distance too; clean, upstanding peaks like Gothic cathedrals rising, as the Sweet Grass and the Bear Paws rose, abruptly from the level of the great plains. The sharp smell of bruised sage, the white tents of a round-up camp in a creek bottom, the howl of a wolf far off in the night—these Robin's heart suddenly

ached for—and for something else, that he felt deep within him but would never admit.

"By God, I've a mind to go back and face the music!" he said aloud. "They can't hang me. I'd as soon spend two or three years in Deer Lodge as here."

Of so little value did freedom seem to him in that moment. There was more than homesickness. A man's liberty is dear but so is pride. Only cowards fled the field. He hadn't fought a rear guard action. For four months that inner sense of shame had been slowly accumulating in Robin. All that he cared about, his little cosmos in its entirety, lay under the shadow of the Bear Paws. He had been stampeded into flight from a danger real enough, but which he should have faced.

Robin rose from the weather-beaten pile.

"I *will* go back," he said to himself. "I've had enough of this. I shouldn't have run."

Within twenty-four hours he was aboard a Great Northern train rolling east through a gloomy pass in the Coast Range. He lay in a berth, his face pressed to a window pane, watching the dark forest slip by, a formless blur in the night, listening to the click-clack of rail joints under the iron wheels. He felt shut in, oppressed by those walls of dusky timber draped with mossy streamers, clouds above and a darksome aisle in the forest down which the train thundered. No place for a man hungry for bright sun and blue skies.

At dawn the train dropped into the Yakima country. The land opened up in wide vistas. Cattle grazed on rolling hills, dark moving dots on pale green. Robin threw open a window. He leaned out sniffing. Sagebrush ran up to the right of way, receded into the distance, silver-gray in the first sunlight. He could smell it, sweet in his nostrils.

He lay back in his berth with a strange sense of relief. As the sailor sick of shore sights and sounds goes gladly down to the sea so Robin returned to his own country. . . .

At Havre, Robin found time between trains to cross the street and find the livery stable.

"I left a saddle here about Christmas," he said to the hostler. "A three-quarter rig Cheyenne with a pair of *anqueros*."

"Yeah, I recollect. Take a look," the man replied.

Robin hauled his saddle out of the harness room, borrowed

a sack to put it in and check it as baggage on the train. He was under way up the branch line within ten minutes. An hour and a half later he stood on the station platform at Big Sandy, wondering with a mingled curiosity and indifference how long it would be before a deputy sheriff would saunter up and say:

"Well, kid, I guess you'll have to come along with me."

No, in the face of those purple mountains lifting high in the southeast, the limitless stretch of lonesome prairie spreading north to the Canada line, all those familiar places, the troublesome future didn't seem to matter so much. Silent, lonely, sterile here and there, forbidding at first glance to such as were bred to field and lane and orchard, the plains wove their own charm about the hearts of men. All those leagues of grass and hill and canyon seemed to hold out invisible hands to Robin. Bright with its vernal garment the land smiled answer to his eager look as a maiden smiles to a returning lover.

He stood a minute sweeping old horizons with his gaze. The station agent nodded. No one had arrived. No one had departed. It was too early in the morning for loungers. A man from Sutherland's store took up the mail sack, said "hello" to Robin. Robin followed him across the street. He would put up at the hotel. If he went unmolested for the present—and that was likely enough—he would take horse later and ride to the Bar M Bar. If they wanted him they could come and get him. Months in a strange country had taught Robin that he was not the stuff of which an Ishmael is made.

The moon-faced Teutonic host of the Bear Paw House gazed at him blandly over a varnished counter.

"Ach, so," he said. "You have been away, yes."

No more. Robin signed the register. From force of old habit he suggested a drink. Host and guest went into the bar. Backed by a mirror that reflected polished glass and decorative bottles a bartender Robin had known for years said, "Hello, kid," and set out the drinks. Robin grew a little puzzled. This was carrying the normal cow-country nonchalance toward a man who had been in "trouble" to an extreme. He might have been gone only overnight, by their attitude, instead of having jumped the country after killing a well-known man.

He drank, and leaned on the bar, gazing about. A rider loped from somewhere about the town and dismounted with a

flourish before the hotel. He stalked in, clanking his spurs. Robin knew him, Jack Boyd of the Block S.

"Hello, old-timer." He pumped Robin's hand. "Where the hell you been all winter? Have a shot."

"On the coast," Robin said briefly.

They drank. Boyd talked. He was a rattle tongue, no sequence to his conversation. Robin's wonder grew. What ailed them all? Were they all with him, and trying to make him feel at ease, guessing that he had come back to face trial?

His gaze for a second turned to the open door. Across the street a livery barn bulked large. Its double doors gaped on the brown earth roadway. A man led out a saddled horse, put his foot in the stirrup and swung up.

Robin stared incredulously. He could see the features under the gray Stetson. The flash of silver conchos on saddle, silver inlay on bit and spur, glinting in the sun; Robin saw these and still could not believe. He turned to Boyd.

"Who's that on the black horse?" he demanded.

Boyd left off an argument with the bartender to look.

"You been snow-blind lately?" he laughed. "Your eyes still full of that Puget Sound fog? That's Shinin' Mark. You know as well as I do. He's actin' meaner'n I ever knew him since he got around," Boyd added in a lower tone. "Some of these days, somebody that's hot in the head and quick on the draw is goin' to get him right."

"Since he got around?" Robin caught at the first sentence, repeated it in an interrogative tone.

"Wasn't it before you went away? No? Well, he got careless with his six-gun down in the Birch Creek line camp last winter and shot his fool self. Darned near cashed in. He was on the bed ground for two months."

Robin listened, with a loud thumping in his breast, a feeling of relief that was like a great weight rolled off his back. He had seen the glaze of death gather in Mark Steele's eyes as his knees sagged under him. He had stood there looking down at the red stain spreading and soaking into the dirt floor. He had seen Mark lie like a log for twenty minutes. It had never occurred to Robin that he wasn't dead. How could a man, even an iron-hard man, survive a .45 slug through the base of his neck, in the region of his wishbone? Yet there he was, reining in a black

horse that curvetted and twisted in eagerness to be off, while Mark talked to the stableman. Robin could see his lips move.

The old passion flickered up in Robin's breast. All the indignity, the calculated insults, the treachery, Tex Matthews' death, Steele's bold thievery, stirred Robin's blood again. The old sores reopened.

So that was how it went? He wondered why. What had caused Steele and Thatcher to take that tack? Accident! Didn't want it known that an unarmed boy had shot him with his own gun. Vanity? Perhaps. It didn't matter.

Tucked within the waistband of his trousers Robin's .45 rested against his stomach. He slid his hand under his coat, felt the curved bone handle of the gun and took a step toward the door. Boyd's eyes had been on his face, in which all unconsciously something of Robin's feelings must have been reflected. Boyd caught his arm as he moved.

"Aw, look. Let him go for this time," he counseled cheerfully. "You got all the time there is to carry on your private war. He's pullin' for Lonesome Prairie. They're gatherin' saddle stock. He wanted me to ride with him but I ain't quite ready. Pass it up this time, Robin. Have a drink and let him go. Who wants to throw lead on a spring day like this?"

Robin laughed. He could scarcely have followed up that first impulse since at that very moment Shining Mark gave the black his head and broke away in a gallop. Robin watched him grow small until he was a bobbing dot on the out trail. Then he said to Jack Boyd: "I guess he'll keep for awhile."

"Let's amble across to the Silver Dollar," Jack suggested. "There's some fellows over there."

The afternoon and evening Robin spent was like that of a prodigal son returned. He had not been in Big Sandy since the evening he cut his string and went home full of shame and impotent anger. He had come back under a cloud. That cloud was dispelled. Here on his own ground, among his own peers, he passed the first carefree hours that had fallen to his lot in weary months.

He went to bed at midnight and lay for a few minutes in the dark room staring at the dim walls, smiling to himself. He did not care what came next. Shining Mark was still to be reckoned with. He still had his own word to make good. But

that would be man to man, if at all. In Robin's mind the T Bar S and theft still remained a problem to be solved if he desired to remain in the Bear Paws. But the outcome of any personal clash with Mark Steele was something Robin could now accept with composure. Somehow, in his mind, Shining Mark had shrunk to normal proportions. Or perhaps he himself had grown. He couldn't say. But he knew how he felt.

Robin ate breakfast in the morning, took horse and rode south, rode with a heart as light as the little clouds drifting around Shadow Butte. The Butte itself lifted its cone summit high above him. He rode past it on ground softened by spring rains, warmed by a spring sun, green with new grass and speckled with flowers. The creeks ran clear and strong. The Bear Paws nursed snow-caps on the highest peaks, white pyramids on a base of dusky pine. Crows sailed cawing around him. Meadow larks swung on sagebrush trilling their mating song. Robin lifted his lusty young voice in a ribald version of The Spanish Cavalier, a careless horseman chanting as he rode.

He pulled up a minute on the ridge where he had watched the sunset with May Sutherland, and the singing mood passed. It was all different now. His face turned toward the Bar M Bar. He rode on soberly, wondering what his welcome would be like. He stopped once more to gaze at the closed door of his own cabin, but he did not dismount. The new grass was springing thick in the bluejoint meadow. He smiled. He might have a use for that place yet.

Ten minutes later he rode into Mayne's. Old Dan himself stood in the stable door. He stared at Robin, speechless.

"Well, I'm back," Robin announced the obvious.

Mayne shook his hand but with no heartiness in his grip.

"You ain't exactly overcome with joy, are you?" Robin challenged. "What's wrong with you—or with me?"

"Nothin'. Nothin' *a*-tall," Mayne protested. "Only—well, things is sorta different, I guess, from last fall."

"How?" Robin's tone was curt.

"Aw, hell," Mayne growled. "I might as well give it to you straight. Me an' Mark Steele has buried the hatchet. He's bought a half interest in the Bar M Bar. We was a little wrong about them T Bar S's. Anyway, that's settled. So—well, you see how it is, don't you?"

"You've took Mark Steele in as a partner?" Robin stared with narrowing eyes.

"Yeah. His old man died in Oklahoma an' left him fifteen thousand cash. It come about kinda offhand. They hauled Mark up here after—after he got shot down Birch Creek, an' we took care of him. He ain't so bad when you know him."

"I see," Robin said slowly. "So because he has a bunch of money to put in with you you've overlooked a little thing like him stealin' your stock. You've taken a cow thief for a partner!"

"That's tall talk, young feller," Mayne growled.

"Maybe. But I've said it. If it worries you I won't talk no more. But you know what I think. Yes, it sure makes it different," Robin muttered. "I'll go see Ivy an' ride on."

"You better——" Mayne began, but Robin had turned his back and was striding toward the house. The old man stood leaning against the stable wall, twisting his scraggly mustache, poking absently at the soft earth with the toe of his boot. His expression was not precisely a happy one.

Robin stalked through the kitchen. Whether driven by eagerness or anxiety he did not consider. Of old Ivy would have run across the yard to meet him. He found her in the living room sitting beside a window which commanded the yard. He knew she had seen him. She rose as he entered but there was no welcome in her eyes. They were darkly sullen, a little frightened.

Robin didn't speak. He came up to her, put his hands on her shoulders, looked searchingly into her face. What he saw there troubled him with a sudden heart heaviness. To be near her stirred him deeply. Yet as he looked at her he knew that something which had linked them close was gone, extinguished like a burned-out candle.

"You don't seem noway glad to see me," he said gently.

"Did you expect me to be?" she returned. "You never wrote."

"How could I, the way things were?" he asked. "You know I would have sent word. It never struck you I'd either do that or come back because I couldn't stay away from—from everybody and everything?"

"You ran like a scared coyote," she said tensely. "An' you didn't shoot Mark, after all. He shot himself with his own gun. You were just scared of him."

"Yes? Well?"

Robin paused on the interrogation. He shook her gently.

"Are you goin' to bust everythin' up between us?" he asked quietly. "Is *that* the way you feel? Did I have to camp right on your trail to hold you?"

"It's already busted," Ivy snapped.

She shook herself free of his hands, backed away a step or two, looking at Robin with a dumb implacable resentment smoldering in her eyes. She turned to a shelf on the wall, took something out of a box and handed it to Robin without a word. It was the little diamond he had given her—their engagement ring. Robin held it in the palm of his hand. A pang of sadness, mingled with a touch of anger stabbed him.

"Maybe it'll do for another girl," Ivy said spitefully. "I don't need it no more."

"Neither do I," he said hotly, and flung the ring into the dead ash of the fireplace. For a moment they stared at the puff of ashes where it fell, at each other. The girl's lips quivered. Robin turned on his heel and walked out of the house.

Old Mayne still leaned against the stable wall. Robin gathered up his reins, turned to ask a question.

"Ivy goin' to marry Steele?"

He shot the words at Mayne with a harshness that made the old man start.

"I reckon so," he said apologetically. "*I* kain't help it."

"Nobody said you could," Robin flung over his shoulder.

Dark found him sitting with his feet on his own stove, in a house without food or bedding, thinking, thinking! To-morrow he would ride back to town. But to-night—here—he was not conscious of hunger nor of physical discomfort as he sat with hands clasped over his knees, an ache in his breast.

Sometimes it was bad for a man to see things too clearly.

CHAPTER XVI

A CHALLENGE

BEFORE dawn Robin saddled and headed south on the trail of Red Mike. Minus supper and breakfast he was hungry. But his mount was fresh and fed with grazing in the little pasture. Robin was tough. A meal more or less didn't greatly matter. And sunrise brought him a happier mood. Luck also bestowed a double quantum as if to make up for past niggardliness. Ten miles from the Bar M Bar he ate hot cakes and coffee with a lowly sheep herder tending his flock on the northern flank of Chase Hill. Within an hour of that camp he found his sorrel horse, ranging as the cow horse at liberty was wont to range, with a band of the untamed. The wild bunch broke headlong in the general direction of the Bar M Bar. Robin fell in behind them. The direction suited his book. He had a bed roll and a pack-saddle still at Mayne's, and a cow-puncher's bed was part of his working outfit. He would need that bedding.

So he loped behind the wild horses until they ran themselves out. Once Robin caught up and jogged at their heels he headed them where he wished. With rope ready he watched his chance. A touch of the spurs, a deft throw, and the rawhide noose closed about Red Mike's burnished copper neck.

Robin led him on to Mayne's, changed his saddle to Red Mike's back and lashed his bedding on the livery horse. He saw Ivy's face for a moment at a window. Her father strolled over to say a word or two. Robin answered in monosyllables, not because he was still angry or resentful—that had all evaporated—but because there was nothing more to say. When the last hitch was taken in the pack rope he rode on.

He slept that night at a horse ranch in the foothills halfway between Shadow Butte and Big Sandy. Before noon he was in sight of the town, the pack horse trotting to keep up with Red

Mike's running walk. He did not know what he was going to do but that uncertainty sat lightly on his mind. He had money in his pocket. An able range rider was welcome anywhere. In all the long tier of states bordering the east slope of the Rockies a man who could ride and rope could be a rolling stone and still gather moss. If the Bar M Bar and the Block S were both taboo there was still the Bear Paw Pool, the Shonkin, the YT and the Circle within a radius of seventy miles. He did not have to quit Montana, only that immediate section of the Bear Paw mountains—and that merely because he chose, because the south side of the hills had grown distasteful as well as dangerous. On the latter count alone he would not have retreated. He was not even sure he would leave. He would never run again. Once was enough.

But still he was minded to leave Birch Creek and Little Eagle and Chase Hill, all that varied region he had haunted for three happy years. Robin wanted to go clean, to be rid of every tie. Most of them were broken. There remained only that hundred and sixty acres which he had dreamed of making a home. He would sell it if he could, for what he could get. Since the Block S was the only outfit that set any store by land Robin thought he might sell it to Adam Sutherland. Looking farsightedly into a future that should long outlast himself Sutherland had increased his acreage as his herds increased. Sutherland would give him something for that homestead, although old Adam owned thousands of acres he had got for a song and sung the song himself. Robin didn't want to see it again. Shining Mark in partnership with Dan Mayne. Mark marrying Ivy. Pah!

Yet in spite of these dolors riding across earth that exhaled the odor of new growth under a sun blazing yellow in a sapphire sky, Robin's spirits gradually rose. A man couldn't be sad in the spring astride of a horse that bounced under him like a rubber ball. Robin whistled. He sang little snatches of song. He pulled up on a hill to stare across the flat in which Big Sandy lay. Space and freedom! Room to move and breathe—and some to spare. The sunrise plains before they were fenced and trammeled. A new, new land but yesterday wrested by the cattlemen with his herds from the Indian and the buffalo. Robin could not visualize the old wild west of which he was a part. He could only feel instinctively that as it was it was good.

Concretely his mind turned upon matters of immediate concern. Below him, where Big Sandy creek debouched from the rolling country he saw tents and wagons and a cluster of horses.

"Aha," he said to Red Mike, "there's the Block S. They're in off Lonesome Prairie. They'll be draggin' it to the home ranch to get organized for round-up. I reckon Shinin' Mark'll be in town."

It was out of his way to swing over to the Block S camp. He had no qualms about bearding the wolf (Robin couldn't think of Mark Steele as a lion; a lion in his mind had a certain majesty) but he saw no reason for seeking the wolf in his own lair. Town would do as well. He had no desire to avoid Shining Mark. In fact he had a certain curiosity about what Mark would do or say. To Thatcher he gave scarcely a second thought.

He stabled his horses. By the hitching rack before the Silver Dollar a row of cow ponies drooped their heads in equine patience. Robin walked into the saloon. His gun was belted on his hip, the first time he had ever carried a six-shooter openly in Big Sandy. Steele was not there. Block S men, Jack Boyd among them, greeted him hilariously. Thatcher alone neither spoke nor smiled. Robin looked him in the eye. "Well," he said casually, "if there's anything on your mind I'm listenin'."

"Nothin' much besides my hat," Thatcher made a feeble effort at grinning. "I'm not lookin' for trouble—unless you are."

That was fair enough in all outward seeming, and Robin felt that Thatcher, for whatever reason, spoke the truth. Most decidedly Tommy Thatcher was not keen for trouble. He showed that plainly enough. It didn't occur to Robin that his own attitude was aggressive, that he was taking a wild bull by the horns with a confidence that made the bull give ground. Thatcher's words and bearing simply gave him an opportunity publicly to close that incident in so far as it could be closed.

"I never went lookin' for trouble in my life," Robin said quietly. "I side-step it if I can. If I can't——"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"Come on, have a drink an' let her slide," Thatcher proffered the peace symbol of the range. Men with bad blood between them didn't drink together.

"It happens I'm not drinkin' to-day, not with anybody," thus Robin announced to all and sundry that he was not refusing the

olive branch merely because it came from Thatcher—although he would have died thirsty rather than drink with a man he felt sure had sped one of the bullets that snuffed out Tex Matthews' life. "Thanks, just the same." Probably no one but himself detected the sardonic note in that phrase of declination.

He walked on up toward the store. He didn't know Mark Steele's whereabouts and he cared less. He wanted to see Adam Sutherland. The old man was in town. If in seeking the owner of the Block S he ran across Mark that was as it happened.

He didn't have to ask a clerk if Sutherland was about. Back by the bookkeeper's desk Sutherland occupied his favorite roost deep in an armchair. The cattleman's face, round and red about a walrus-like mustache didn't alter its normal placidity as Robin approached.

"Hello, kid," he greeted. "I haven't seen you for quite a spell."

"No, and you maybe won't see me for quite a spell again," Robin answered, "if I can do some business with you."

"Well, shoot," Sutherland encouraged.

"It's nothin' much," Robin said, "except that I've been away for quite a while. Since I've been back and looked the ground over I reckon I'll move on again. Nobody loves me and I'm out of a job," he finished with a whimsical twist. It was true, but a truth so stated that it contained for Robin the germ of humor. "I thought maybe I'd sell you that hundred and sixty I homesteaded on the creek above Mayne's."

"Oh, did you? You reckon I'm in the real estate business?" Sutherland rumbled. "You got your deed to it?"

Robin nodded.

"How much you reckon it's worth?"

"As much as I can get for it."

"Well, I might——" Sutherland stopped abruptly. Robin saw the change of expression cross his face. He heard the front door click. Out of one corner of his eye he saw Shining Mark come striding down between the counters.

"You might what?" Robin prompted.

But Sutherland clasped his hands over his rotund stomach and leaned back in his chair, silent and expressionless as a poker player nursing a pat hand.

"Hello, Tyler."

Robin turned his head at Mark's greeting. The quality of the

man's voice was the same, arrogant, subtly menacing.

Robin didn't even trouble to reply. He looked at Mark calmly, an outward, deceptive calm for within something was beginning to burn, a flame that he knew he must keep down. It was like being too close to a venomous snake—only, somehow, for Robin the snake's fangs were drawn. He didn't know why he felt so sure of that but he did. He was no more afraid of Shining Mark than he was afraid of Sutherland's elderly bookkeeper, who was mildness personified. He gazed at Mark with deliberate, insolent scrutiny.

"They tell me you had an accident with your gun down on Birch," he said at length.

"Yeah. Fool thing to do," Steele growled. It struck Robin that Shining Mark was a little uneasy.

"Shot yourself with your own gun, eh?" Robin drawled. "Right in the wishbone, they say. Too bad it wasn't about six inches higher. Seems like I heard, too, that it wasn't quite accidental."

"What you tryin' to do? Provoke me?" Steele asked coolly. "You act like you wanted to open up a package of trouble. I'd sure accommodate you on the spot if I was heeled. You act real bad when you happen to find me unarmed."

"You're a liar as well as a thief," Robin took a step toward him. "Do you want me to prove it?"

Shining Mark's face flamed. He looked at Robin, then at Sutherland sitting quietly in his chair, an impassive listener save that his eyes were narrowly watching both men. Mark stared at Robin. That youth laughed aloud in his enemy's face. A whimsical thought took form in a play on words—steel had lost its temper!

"You're weakenin', Mark," he taunted. "I've just come in from Mayne's ranch. I said you were a liar and a thief. I say it again."

"I heard you," Steele replied, making a visible effort at self-control, although his lean face was burning. "You don't need to say anything to me at all. I'll drop you in your tracks as soon as I get my hands on a gun, you mouthy pup. You sure do swell up when you happen to have a six-gun on your hip and catch me barehanded."

"I beat you barehanded once, and I can do it again," Robin

kept his voice low. "I don't reckon you understand why I called you a liar. I know a Texas trick or two myself. You——"

He darted a forefinger at Mark and the man jumped backward—but not so quickly that Robin's fingers failed to tap smartly against something hard and outline it briefly under Steele's coat.

"You got a gun in a Texas holster under your arm," Robin said contemptuously. "And you talk about being unarmed. As if anything you could say or do would throw me off my guard for a second. You swine! When I think that you put the fear of God in me once, I could laugh. *That's* how dangerous you look to me now."

Robin took off his soft Stetson and slapped Mark across the face. Mark put up his hand and backed away. Behind him Robin heard Adam Sutherland grunt, heard the scrape of his chair legs. Robin laughed again. He remembered the dead cows in Birch Creek. He remembered Tex Matthews' stiffened body across a bloody saddle, borne by a tired horse, led by a tired rider through a long winter night. He remembered with a bitter clearness Steele swinging his spurred foot from a table in a line camp and saying cold-bloodedly, "I hate to muss up a perfectly good camp but you've bothered me long enough."

With those pictures blazing bright in his memory Robin had to laugh—or cry. He did laugh, looking straight into Steele's burning eyes, but there was no mirth in the sound.

"I've said my say," he kept his voice without passion. "If a gun under your arm isn't good enough for you, go buckle one on your hip. I'm not even going to bother looking for you, Steele. That's how much I think of you. I won't waste no time nor talk on you after this. If you want my scalp—and you've been after it a long time—you'll have to come after me. If you jump me you won't be able to say it was an accident with your own gun a second time."

Steele turned and walked away. Once he hesitated, seemed about to turn. Robin stood watching him, one hand resting on the desk, a half-smoked cigarette in his fingers. And when Steele passed through the swinging doors Robin followed, his thought and vision so concentrated on the man ahead that he did not hear Sutherland call after him:

"Hey, Tyler. Come back here. I want to talk to you."

CHAPTER XVII

THE SEAT OF THE MIGHTY

ABOUT Shining Mark's capacity for ruthless action Robin had no illusions whatever. He did not jump to the conclusion as a lesser man might have done that his open defiance of Steele had driven him to a cover from which he would not emerge. Mark was pretty deeply committed one way and another, and he was growing more cautious, that was all. Robin had simply put him on the defensive. Mark would get him when and where he could. After that exchange before Adam Sutherland, Shining Mark had to go through with it; he couldn't hold up his head before his employer if he didn't. Robin knew that when he deliberately called him "thief." That was why he uttered the epithet. He meant to put the shoe on the other foot, make Mark the aggressor if war must ensue. And he had succeeded. The mere fact that certain fibers within him had hardened so that he neither feared Steele nor any other man did not lead Robin to underestimate his enemy. Shining Mark was more dangerous than ever, for all he had backed up from an insult with a gun hidden under his armpit.

So Robin took no foolhardy chances. He went to the hotel, lounged in the bar and the office, and kept his eyes about him. Two or three of the Block S riders wandered in. There was nothing to indicate that they had heard of any new clash. Robin chaffered with them, but he did not cross the street. He had said his say. The rest was up to Mark.

Watching idly through a window half an hour later Robin saw Mark mount his horse and ride to the store, emerge therefrom presently and jog down the street looking neither to right nor left, vanishing at last toward the round-up camp.

Robin ate supper, played cards until ten o'clock, went to bed. In the morning he saddled Red Mike and rode south a mile or

two. The Block S outfit was gone. Robin rode west toward the mountains to see a rancher he knew. He had all the time in the world. He meant to stay around Big Sandy two or three days. He would sell that bit of land to Adam Sutherland if he could. Then he would drift. He would go on spring round-up with the YT or the Pool. One of the big outfits would make a place for him he knew. If later his trail crossed Mark Steele's—well, he would never eat his words.

In the evening he went back to town. When he walked into the hotel the rotund host said:

"Sutherland, he send the Chinaman for you. He want to see you by his house ven you come in already."

Robin walked over to the Sutherland cottage. Sutherland stood on the top step rolling a cigar between his lips.

"You wanted to see me?"

"Yes. Come on in. Still chilly in the evenin's."

Robin sat down in an upholstered chair in a comfortably fitted, homelike room. Sutherland stared at him for a minute.

"You'll know me, I reckon, next time you see me," Robin suggested dryly. That appraising stare ruffled him a trifle.

Sutherland grinned.

"I reckon I will," said he. "What possessed you to jump on Mark Steele roughshod?"

"He had it coming," Robin defended. "Anyway, I didn't jump him. I just told him where he got off."

"Well, I guess he got off all right," Sutherland grumbled. "Now what's the root of this trouble between you and Mark Steele? Strikes me it's more than a girl. Twice you've called him a thief. I got a right to know."

"You have," Robin admitted frankly. "But I'm not goin' to tell you, right now. You'd have only my bare word. If I had a round-up crew to myself for a couple of months I might be able to *show* you."

"Is it that serious?" Sutherland asked slowly.

Robin looked at him keenly. He couldn't quite make out this heavy-faced man whose brain was of a vastly different quality from his flesh-burdened body or he would never have become a power in the Bear Paws. Sutherland wasn't stupid. Neither was Robin. Only Robin didn't want to talk, now that he had a hearer —where six months earlier he would have poured out his tale.

"Do you know that Steele has bought in with Dan Mayne?" he asked Sutherland.

Sutherland nodded. His eyes were on Robin narrowly.

"This got something to do with Bar M Bar stock, this trouble between you two?"

"Partly."

"You don't seem to want to talk."

"I won't," Robin said bluntly. "If I had a chance I might show you."

"All right, you can show me. I'm from Missouri."

"How?" Robin inquired.

"Well," Sutherland drawled. "You can go to work for the Block S for one thing. You said nobody loved you and you were out of a job. I'll give you a job."

"I couldn't work for the Block S, as things stand," Robin said impatiently. "You know that."

"Don't see why. You're a cow-puncher. I can use you."

"See here," Robin told him bluntly. "I've ideas of my own. The only way I'd ever work for the Block S would be to run it."

"All right," Sutherland said abruptly. "I'll give you a whirl at being a range boss. Mark Steele has quit me. Think you can fill his boots? It'll take a man."

"I fill my own boots," Robin answered slowly. "That's good enough."

A slow smile spread over Sutherland's broad face.

"You'll be the youngest wagon boss in Montana, I reckon," he drawled.

Robin didn't answer. But his heart leaped within him. To attain the seat of the mighty at a single bound! It seemed incredible. He had made a reckless statement bear rich fruit. When he told Sutherland that the only way he would work for the Block S would be to run it he had been sincere enough; but that was only an oblique way of stating that he didn't want to be a Block S rider as matters stood. This was a horse of a different color. When it came to that he was a cowman. Responsibility had no terrors for him. If he could handle men? Well, why not? Power is a sweet morsel for any man to set his teeth in. Robin had confidence without vain conceit. He knew himself equal to the job.

Sutherland mused, pulling at his walrus mustache, his rubi-

cund face glowing behind the smoke cloud of his cigar.

"Yes, sir," he continued. "You'll be the youngest wagon boss in Montana. I'm kinda disappointed in Mark. He was a slashin' good cowman. Maybe gettin' some money left him has spoiled him. He's quit. Least that's how I take it. He drew all the money he had comin', put Jack Boyd in charge of the outfit, and got on the train this afternoon. So you go out an' take charge. The wagons'll be camped by the ranch. I'll give you a note to Jack?"

"All right," Robin said quietly.

"Now look," Sutherland continued. "I don't want you to take up with the idea you've scared Mark Steele outa the country, because that'd be a bad mistake. If he didn't have it out with you right then and there he had his own reasons besides bein' afraid to take a chance. Mark's got a money interest on this range now. He'll be back. I'd be watchful," Sutherland said very slowly, "if I was you."

Robin had no mind to contradict that. He merely nodded.

"I don't want to crowd you," the old man went on in the kindliest tone Robin had ever heard him use. "I ain't got to be near sixty and own thirty thousand cattle by goin' through the world blind, deaf and dumb. Maybe a man here and there fools me for awhile. See you don't. If I trust a man and he knifes me, I don't forget. You say you can show me somethin' if you have a round-up crew to work with. Well, you got it. And I'm from Missouri. I'm waitin' to be shown."

"I don't want to talk big," Robin murmured. "I'm kinda dizzy right now. But when I spread my hand on the table I think you'll say it's good."

On a ridge overlooking the home ranch on Little Eagle, Robin drew rein for a look. The painted roofs of barn and out-buildings and rambling house glowed in the sun. Windows flashed like beacons. The willows fringing creek and irrigating ditch were one shade of green, the wide meadows another, the pines that clothed the hills above still a darker hue. And there were the white tents of the round-up glistening against the sward, the scattered grazing horses. He could hear far off the sweet tinkle of bells. His outfit! The youngest range boss in Montana. Twenty riders, thirty thousand cattle, a thousand square

miles of range under his hand! Robin could have whooped. Yet there was a sobering effect in the magnitude of his task. It wasn't simple. There were added complications no one knew but himself, himself and Mark Steele and Tommy Thatcher. Perhaps Adam Sutherland shrewdly guessed that where so much smoke arose there must be fire.

Robin looked away down Birch Creek toward the Bar M Bar, thinking of Ivy Mayne being urged along a way that promised unhappiness, driven by impulses her dumb sullen heart could never fathom. Robin had lived all his young life close to nature, striving with nature. He had no bookish sophistication, but he was keenly alive, his mind kindled easily. He had a keen sense of the remorselessness of natural law. Nature's ways were sometimes dark in getting her business done. The individual wasn't so much, just as a single animal in a herd was of no great consequence—but the herd counted. The pain and passion of mating and begetting and dying were no mysteries to Robin. What he didn't know he could dimly grasp. Passion was sometimes wrapped up and obscured in material complexities. Conflict was inherent in life itself, from the time a man drew his first breath until he breathed his last.

Looking away toward that hidden ranch he could visualize Ivy with Mark a sinister figure in the background. He felt sorry for her. In the same breath he wondered if May was at the home ranch. Somehow he hadn't wanted to ask.

He shook himself out of these reflections and rode on. He had to dip into a coulee, cross a little ridge, traverse a horse pasture and pass the house to reach the camp. He dipped into the hollow. As he topped the opposite crest a head appeared, a head surmounted by yellow hair, a pair of shoulders clad in a cream-colored blouse.

Close by this figure seated on a flat rock a chestnut horse that might have been a twin brother to Red Mike stood with trailing reins.

Robin drew up beside this vision, answered the smile of greeting, got down and seated himself beside May.

"I guess I'm kinda unexpected," he observed.

"Not so much," she told him. "I heard you were back."

"The boys would talk, I expect," he remarked. "Still, I guess I have some news they couldn't spread."

"Yes?" she looked curious.

"Might not interest you much, at that," Robin drawled. "The Block S has a new range boss."

"You?" she breathed. Her eyes danced.

"Good guess," Robin said. "Kinda sudden. I don't know which is the most surprised, me or your dad."

"I'm glad," May smiled. Then she sobered. "What happened to Mark Steele? Did you meet him?"

"Yes, I met him," Robin answered truthfully. "Nothing happened. Maybe something'll happen later. I don't know. Don't care."

"I wonder why he said he shot himself by accident last winter?" the girl murmured.

"To save his face, I reckon. He's proud. He don't like to be beaten. I did beat him that time."

May stirred uneasily.

"A girl can stir up a lot of trouble sometimes," she said.

"It wasn't a girl. I told you that before."

"There *was* a girl, wasn't there," she whispered.

"There was, but there isn't no more."

Robin crinkled his brow. He looked at May intently. He had refused to discuss that matter even with Adam Sutherland, until he had some tangible proof of his assertions. Why should he feel a burning desire to tell Sutherland's daughter all about the coil Mark Steele had woven around him? Yet that impulse was irresistible. "Can you keep things to yourself?"

"What do you think?" she asked, a touch of color rising in her cheeks. "Try me."

Bluntly, baldly, with a cow-puncher's vivid terseness of phrase, Robin, sitting on the rock beside her, the embossed scabbard of his .45 resting against her skirt, told her the tale from the beginning, from the hour he lay on the bank below Cold Spring and watched thieves at work. When he recounted the episode in the Birch Creek line camp May shivered. When he finished she sat staring fixedly at the ground, her hands in her lap, the white fingers locked tight together. Robin bent his head to peer into her face.

Her eyes were bright-wet, troubled. He remembered the Coleridge of his school days, ruefully.

"Shucks," he said, "I didn't mean to be like the Ancient

Mariner, to fix you with my glitterin' eye and make you listen to my tale of woe. I shouldn't 'a' worried you with all that stuff."

"I'm not—not a worrier," May whispered. "Only I can see it all so clearly. I knew there was some good reason for my hating that man so. It must have been simply hell for you."

Robin swallowed something that came up in his throat. It *had* been hell. It moved him deeply that this slim wisp of a girl understood so clearly what it had been like. He sat silent for a minute.

Then some unreasoned impulse made him put his arms around her, draw her up close to him. For one long second May looked searchingly into his face. What she saw there must have satisfied her, for she smiled. When Robin's lips touched hers she returned his kiss with a pressure that made his heart leap.

And then she snuggled her yellow head against his neck with a contented, happy sigh.

CHAPTER XVIII

A COURSE DEFLECTED

MANY a time in the next two days did Robin's eyes turn on the King's castle, sprawling brown and green and white on its knoll above the ranch buildings. Like a fire that had been smoldering a long time and broken at last into flames under the winds of circumstance, so love burned in his breast, a new love beside which the old one seemed only a pale flicker —something feeble, born of propinquity.

Yet for all the commotion that made his heart flutter and set him to dreaming whenever his hands were idle, Robin did not let the spring grass grow under his feet in shouldering the new responsibility Sutherland had laid on him. He set his men diligently attending to the various details that would enable the Block S to start the spring round-up as a smoothly functioning machine.

If the Block S riders wondered at the lightning change in wagon bosses they wondered silently and accepted Robin at his face value. They knew that he had somehow beaten Shining Mark and any man who could do that was to be respected in any capacity. Robin had no strain put on his authority. The Block S crew knew its business. They knew a cowman when they saw him. Robin was born to the range and running a round-up was only a logical step up.

Wherefore he had no need to either train or watch his men. Mark Steele had left few loose ends behind him. There was only the regular routine of getting ready. Robin had time to burn. Some of it May helped him to consume. Somehow they did not need to talk much to achieve understanding. Robin was no fool. He knew he had his spurs to win. He did not know how Adam Sutherland would take him as a prospective son-in-law. When he voiced that doubt to May she only smiled.

"Do you remember saying to me that I'd probably marry a French count or an English lord and live in a castle and wear silk dresses all the time?" she teased. "Do you suppose dad has that sort of ambition for me?"

"Would it make any difference to you—far as I'm concerned—if he had?"

He had his arm around her at that moment. May looked up.

"Nobody ever quite knows what's in my father's mind," she answered slowly. "He never gives himself away. He keeps his own counsel and acts. But I know what's in my mind—and in my heart. He's been good to me in so many different ways. But when it comes to this—there's no use borrowing trouble, Robin. Wait and see. I'm yours. You're mine. Nobody can get around that."

"Is it real?" he asked. "Sometimes I wonder if it's just a fancy of yours—or if I'm dreaming."

She stopped his mouth with a kiss by way of answer.

"I'll penalize you if you say things like that," she threatened. "If it's a dream I never want to wake up."

Robin, sometimes when he was alone, would look away south over the foothills, to the dark line that marked the course of Birch Creek in which nestled the Bar M Bar, recalling a dream out of which he had wakened with a bitter taste in his mouth. But this—this was different.

He would try to peer into the future. When he did it seemed unreckonable. There was still a tangle to unravel, enemies to cope with. Life hadn't become less complicated because he was off with an old love and on with a new.

It became even more complicated before long. At noon of the third day Adam Sutherland arrived. Robin rode over from camp when he saw the bay team and top buggy roll into the ranch yard. "Come up to the house," Sutherland invited. "I got to augur with you awhile."

They walked across the yard, Sutherland silent and thoughtful. May met them on the porch. Old Adam held her at arm's length admiringly.

"You look like a new twenty-dollar gold piece," he said. "The mountain air sure agrees with you."

Color deepened on the girl's cheeks.

"It always did," she laughed.

"Tell 'em to have lunch ready in half an hour, an' leave me and Tyler be for awhile," he said. "I got to go back to town right away."

May disappeared within. Sutherland planted himself in a wicker chair on the porch.

"Well kid," he said bluntly, "I was a little bit previous about Mark Steele. Likewise, I've made other plans about you."

Robin stiffened but said nothing, waiting only with a touch of uneasiness for what was coming. There was bound to be a fly in the ointment, he thought morosely.

"Mark hasn't quit." Sutherland eyed him a moment before he continued. "It seems he only went off for a spell to attend some private business. Likewise, seein' as he ain't got no grudge against you, and don't exactly fancy havin' to shoot you up, an' not proposin' to quit the country just because you're on the war path, he thought he better give you a chance to cool off."

"Oh, hell!" Robin exploded. "I don't care two whoops about Mark Steele's reasons for anything. Come to the point. Have you changed your mind about me runnin' the Block S?"

"Well, not exactly," Sutherland returned unruffled. "But for good an' sufficient reasons of my *own,*" he stressed the possessive, "I've concluded to let Mark run the round-up on the home range again. I got another job for you, though."

Robin didn't speak. He couldn't understand. It seemed to him like blowing hot and cold. There was a double disappointment in being deposed before he had fairly taken up the reins —and to stand aside for Shining Mark galled him more than he wished to admit. He rose and took up his hat.

"Set down an' listen to me, kid." Sutherland's tone was friendly. Robin didn't sit down, but he stood to listen.

"There's one thing most of us don't like," Sutherland continued. "That's a man that don't know his own mind. Right now you're thinkin' I don't know my own mind. An' you're wonderin' why. Was your heart set on runnin' the Block S round-up this spring?"

Robin looked at him for a second or two.

"What's the difference," he said at last, "what my heart might be set on? That don't spell nothin' to you. If you figure Mark Steele is a better man for your purpose than me, that settles it. But I don't have to agree with you, do I?"

"Well, I'd kinda like to have you agree with me."

"I ain't likely to agree with you on anything in connection with Mark Steele," Robin declared.

"You might possibly, if you knew exactly what was in my mind," the old man said dryly. "You don't tell all you know, or think. Maybe other folks has the same habit. It's a useful habit at that, sometimes. I'll say this much: I'd a little sooner have Mark runnin' round-up for me this summer than settin' around the Bar M Bar figurin' out ways of—well, of gettin even with you, f'rinstance, for steppin' into his place; an' other little things he's probably got against you."

"So in order to protect me you'll let me go before I have a chance to show you whether I'm any good or not," Robin said ironically. "Thanks awful. Maybe you reckon I need to be spoon-fed awhile yet."

"If I did I wouldn't waste no time on you," Sutherland grinned. "By gosh, you get sore quick. Didn't I say you still had a wagon boss's job with me?"

"I don't *sabe,*" Robin said impatiently.

"Listen, an' maybe you will," Sutherland replied. "Think you could do any good for yourself—an' for me—if you were turned loose in the Judith Basin an' Arrow Creek country with a crew to gather up five or six thousand head of stock?"

Into Robin's mind flashed a picture of himself riding those lonely bottoms south of the Big Muddy, seeking through bitter weather day after day and finding here and there what he sought. He remembered the bite of the frost. To cover that country again with a dozen riders at his back——

"Go on," he said briefly.

"I've bought the J7 brand from the Leland estate," the old man explained. "It's to be kept quiet. There's reasons. Nobody knows it only the Leland executors, myself an' you. It's not to go any farther until I'm ready to have it known. I'll send you to Benton with a letter to these people. There's an outfit organized, a hundred an' sixty saddle horses, some men—I don't know how many. You'll have to fill up your own crew. Supposedly you'll be runnin' the outfit for the Leland estate, but you'll be runnin' it for me, an' you'll report direct. There'll be money in a Fort Benton bank for you to draw on for pay roll an' runnin' expenses. You'll cover the usual J7 territory, an'

brand up the calves. In the fall you'll ship out everything that's fit for beef. That's all the instructions there is just now. You'll have a free hand."

"Why—if you don't mind me askin'," Robin put it directly to his employer, "don't you send Mark Steele over the river and let me go through with what you started me in on here?"

Sutherland leaned back in his chair.

"Darn it," he said quite casually. "When it comes to Shinin' Mark Steele you got somethin' up your sleeve. You won't tell me what it is. Well, I got somethin' up my sleeve, an' I won't tell you what it is. But I tell you, kid, as I told you in town, that I ain't lived to be sixty, I ain't made my way in the cow business by goin' through the world deaf, dumb an' blind. The reason I send you instead of Mark Steele into the Judith Basin is because I think you're better qualified. Will you go?"

"Yes," Robin said. "Sure, I'll go."

"While you're workin' that south country," Sutherland continued, "I reckon you better hold anything that belongs to this side of the river an' throw 'em across when you're through."

Robin looked at old Adam placidly rolling a cigar between his lips. For a second he had the impulse to show his hand, to tell Sutherland wherein the feud between himself and Mark Steele originated. Somehow, with Steeel coming back to run the Block S he couldn't quite. He had called Steele a thief to his face. He might have occasion to do so again. But accusation wasn't proof. Robin hated empty words. There was proof in plenty across the Missouri. Consciously or unconsciously Sutherland was placing him in a position to accumulate that proof in substantial form, in the shape of T Bar S yearlings and two-year-olds beyond what the brand could possibly yield.

"You'll go back to town with me this afternoon," Sutherland said. "Mark's on his way out, an' I'd as soon you two didn't get together, though he promised he wouldn't start no fuss. I didn't want no gun play. Will you keep your mouth shut an' your hands in your pockets if you should meet him?"

"If he keeps away from me, yes," Robin agreed. "You seem darned anxious to keep peace between us two."

"Dead wagon bosses ain't much good to me," Sutherland drawled. "Dead wagon bosses an' dead cows ain't much good to anybody. You keep that in mind."

CHAPTER XIX

SOUTH OF THE RIVER

ROBIN crossed the Big Muddy on a steel bridge at Fort Benton to take his first look at the J7. He found the camp on a river flat, introduced himself to a lean, dark-faced youth in charge, counted his saddle stock and began to reorganize. Being short-handed his first task was to engage more riders. Luck came his way. In a week the J7 was cap-a-pie—fourteen cowpunchers, two horse wranglers, a capable cook, wagons stocked with grub. Then the J7 round-up vanished into the heart of the Arrow Creek country and Robin flung his men on circle as he moved from creek to creek.

He rode out of Fort Benton on May the tenth. By the middle of June he was combing the Bad Lands opposite the mouth of Cow Creek. Two days before the Fourth of July dawned he was lying on a bench across from Birch. For all practical purposes the spring round-up of the J7 was over. He had covered the range.

He sat now in the burning sunshine on earth so parched that it was hot to the bare hand, looking over the J7 day herd—thinking. The herd had watered, and taken to its noonday siesta. Two riders lolled in their saddles on watch, striving to keep awake in that hot noon silence.

The "reps" who had worked with Robin's crew all spring had cut their horses and cattle and gone home. In that herd under his eye only a few Block S cattle showed, a few strays of other northern brands. The bulk of those grazing or resting cattle bore the T Bar S and the bulk of those T Bar S's were yearlings and two-year-olds—the ripe harvest of two seasons' industrious stealing. There was not among them, Robin surmised, thirty head of the original T Bar S cattle which had been turned loose south of the Bear Paws. Decidedly Jim Bond's herd had shown a miraculous increase.

Robin looked them over and smiled—smiled and went on thinking. For two months he had played a lone hand. Sutherland had given him the briefest outline of work to be performed and left him alone. Robin had done his work. He knew he had done it well. And in addition to legitimate range work the gathering of this T Bar S stuff had exceeded his expectations. He grinned when he thought of what his spring gathering might mean to Shining Mark.

Off in the north the Bear Paws loomed blue out of the heat haze that shimmered on the plains. Robin gazed longingly at those distant mountains. He was hungry for a sight of May. He wanted to talk with Adam Sutherland. He had a crew of lusty, eager youths who had served him faithfully and he wanted them to celebrate the Fourth. He had a fancy for riding into Big Sandy with those fourteen sunburned riders at his back.

The fruit of his reflection ripened speedily to action. He rode into camp, bade the horse wrangler bunch the *remuda* and catch him a certain horse. He drew aside Tom Hayes, the hawk-faced rider who had proved himself a capable second in command.

"I'm going for a little *pasear* by myself," he said. "You move up to the Judith in the cool of evenin'. Tomorrow shove on to the mouth of Eagle Creek. If we can cross this stuff there maybe we'll ride into Big Sandy for the Fourth. I'll be back sometime to-morrow. If I don't," he added as an afterthought, "you hold camp opposite Eagle Creek till I do come."

An hour later Robin was breasting the Missouri river. He had picked a good water horse. He went in naked, holding his clothes in a dry bundle above his head while his mount traversed that half-mile breadth of swimming water.

He loped past the empty line camp where he had left Mark Steele sprawled on the dirt floor that cold December afternoon. It was hot in that sage-floored canyon. Robin took to the bench-land, where cooler airs blew.

In all the broad sweep of Chase Hill and upper Birch he saw no sign of the Block S round-up. With the Bar M Bar two miles on his right he bore up into the Bear Paws and rode a sweat-lathered horse into the Sutherland ranch at sundown. A stable hand told him Sutherland was at home. Robin stalked

over to the house. When his spurs clinked on the first front step a yellow head raised out of a hammock and May came with outstretched hands and shining eyes to meet him.

"It's been a long spring," she whispered. "I'm a patient creature, Robin, but the time has seemed so long, so long!"

"And maybe my time with you will be short," he answered tenderly. "It all depends. Where's your dad?"

"He took his rod and went up the creek to catch some trout for breakfast," May said. "He'll be back soon, I think. Has anything new cropped up? Where have you been all these weeks, and what have you been doing, Robin Hood? You vanished so quickly. What happened? I ask dad, and he merely grins."

"You got my letters, didn't you?" Robin asked. "I wrote twice. I told you I'd gone to run a round-up south of the river. I didn't have much chance to send mail. I've been in the Judith Basin and the Bad Lands all spring."

"You write dear letters," she smiled. "But you don't give much information about what you're doing—only about how you feel."

"Well, isn't that what you mostly want to know?" he teased. "Don't you like me to say I love you in as many different ways as I can set it down in black and white?"

"Of course, silly," she reproved. "But why didn't you stay here and run our round-up instead of Mark Steele?"

"Did your dad tell you?"

"He's like you," she murmured. "He thinks and looks and acts more than he talks. There he is now."

Adam Sutherland came ambling slowly across the yard bearing a rod and reel. He nodded to Robin, opened his basket to show them half a dozen glistening fish; then he shouted through an open window. A Chinese house boy came to bear away tackle and trophies. Sutherland lit a cigar.

"Well, Tyler," he said. "I expect you want to see me about something, eh?"

May rose and withdrew, stopping behind her father's chair to pat his head with one hand while she blew Robin a kiss off the other. When they had the porch to themselves Sutherland turned an impassive eye on Robin.

"I was sort of expectin' you'd turn up," said he. "How'd you get along with the spring work?"

"All right. I'm through except for a day herd we're holdin'. The outfit's movin' in opposite Eagle Creek ford to-morrow," Robin told him. "We've covered the range. Branded out a tally of seventeen hundred calves. Beef stock is shaping up pretty good in the Basin. Feed's good. Looks like it might be a little overstocked, though, on a dry year. Too many sheep outfits over there."

Sutherland nodded.

"I'll move that J7 stuff north next year," he remarked absently.

Robin sat silent a moment.

"Look," he said abruptly. "I've got to stir up somethin'. You asked me twice why I called Mark Steele a thief. I'm goin' to tell you why, now."

Sutherland took the cigar out of his mouth, inspected critically the ash.

"Shoot," he said casually. "I'm listenin'."

Robin began at the beginning, the day he lamed Stormy, the gray horse, by Cold Spring. He spared nothing, no one, himself, Mayne, Ivy, Mark Steele. All that had grown out of Shining Mark's depredations had burned in Robin's breast so long it was a relief to speak freely. Sutherland sat staring at the porch floor, frowning a little, forgetting to puff at his cigar. Once or twice he shifted abruptly in his chair. Once or twice he stared at Robin with narrowed eyes. Dusk deepened into dark while Robin talked. The crickets chirped in the dry grass. Stars twinkled above.

"So all the young staff that's been branded T Bar S and thrown over the river on the ice I've got in my day herd," Robin concluded. "There is a little over three hundred head. I expect a round-up of T Bar S's on the home range would show a lot more. Short of killin' Mark Steele if he jumps me—and I suppose he will jump me if gets a chance because he knows he isn't safe with me on this range—I don't know as I can do any more single-handed. I see no way of provin' Mark owns the T Bar S or any interest in it. I do know that he and Thatcher rustled those calves. I've told you how. The increase in young T Bar S stuff proves it. I'm just as sure they shot Tex and tried to get me as I am that you're settin' in your chair. But I don't know whether what I know and have guessed would

convict 'em in court. There it is. What do you think? And what do you want me to do with those T Bar S's?"

Sutherland rose.

"Come on in where there's a light," he invited.

He led the way into a room originally built of logs and now paneled to the ceiling with oak. Robin had never been inside the Sutherland house before. There was a homelike air of comfort in this room, a peculiarly satisfying atmosphere that Robin could feel even if he did not understand how it was attained. Soft thick rugs lay underfoot. There were deep, upholstered chairs, a few pictures on the walls, trophies of Sutherland's rifle in the way of deer and elk antlers, and a great bearskin spread before a yawning fireplace. An oil lamp burned at each end of the room. Sutherland motioned Robin to a chair, shoved a box of cigars across an oaken table, sat down himself and frowned at the floor.

"This ain't so new to me," he said at last. "Only it comes a lot straighter than I expected. Tex Matthews was my man. I sent him to work for Mayne on purpose. A man with cows scattered over a hundred miles square can't afford to sleep. If you've got anything there's always some smart feller layin' awake nights figurin' how he can take it away from you. A thief *will* steal. Men you trust *will* go wrong. It seems like——"

He fell silent for a minute.

"I hate it!" he began again presently. "For three years I trusted him like he was my son. He's aggressive and he's got brains. But I guess it's the wrong kind of brains—the fox kind. He *is* foxy. If he has laid off rustlin' this spring, he's pretty well in the clear. I can't touch him on suspicion. Unless——"

He sat tugging at his drooped mustache.

"Like havin' a skunk under your house where you can't get at him, and you can't hardly stand the smell," he said. "No wonder he wanted to kill you."

"And you never suspected him?" Robin asked. "If Tex was your man didn't he tell you anything? He knew. And why did you send him to work for Dan Mayne?"

"I wasn't really suspicious of Mark till this winter, not till after he was supposed to have shot himself, an' you jumped the country. I had nothin' but a hunch last year that somebody was rustlin'. Tex Matthews was on the lookout with the round-

up. Another man worked on the outside. I got a notion Mayne might be draggin' his rope. That's why I had Tex edge in there. Tex told me straight he thought Mark was usin' the T Bar S for a blind. I didn't believe him. Not till he was dead. I felt kinda bad about that. There's a big bill for those two to pay, Tyler. But it's got to be collected legal. I don't want no strangler work on this range, nor shootin'—unless deputy sheriffs do the shootin'. The gun fighter's day ought to be over. We got organized law an' law officers. You keep that in mind when your trigger finger itches for Mark Steele."

"My gun hand don't ever itch," Robin answered slowly. "Only if he jumps me, or even acts like he might jump me, I got a lot of things to remember that don't incline me to be peaceful."

"A man has a right to defend himself," Sutherland admitted. "But you have too much chalked up against Steele to stop at defendin' yourself. You burn inside when you face him. I've seen it in your eye twice now. An' I want him alive," he finished grimly. "I want to make him a shinin' example to cow thieves an' murderers."

"Meantime you keep him in charge of your outfit where he's got all the chance in the world to do most anything he wants to do," Robin said tartly. "I don't *sabe* the play."

Sutherland smiled faintly.

"I want him where I can keep cases on him," he said. "Suppose he does get away with a few calves. What's a few hundred calves more or less? I'd lose a thousand head of stock cheerful, to catch a cow thief out of my own outfit. I'll get them cattle all back anyway, sometime. The only question is: How can we nail him an' Thatcher dead right?"

An idea which had lurked nebulously in Robin's mind for days took definite form in that instant.

"Look," said he, "you spoke rather peevish a while ago about trustin' men. Do you reckon you can trust me?"

Sutherland looked at him thoughtfully.

"You *got* to trust men," said he. "You wouldn't be runnin' the J7 if I didn't have a certain amount of confidence in you."

"Maybe you got better reasons for trustin' me than you know," Robin observed. "Probably I hate a thief and a crook and a cold-blooded killer worse than you do, even if I have no

stock to be stolen. Anyway, I have an idea. Will you stake me to about five thousand dollars?"

Sutherland stared at him for a minute, reached into a drawer and took out a check-book.

"I suppose," he rumbled as he handed over the green slip, "it ain't any of my business what you aim to do with my money?"

"You'll get good value for it or you'll get it back." Robin grinned. "Now, about this T Bar S stuff? Will you leave me handle 'em my own way for a while?"

Sutherland nodded.

"One other thing," Robin continued. "Have you figured out any move of your own about Shinin' Mark? Because I'm apt to try something and we don't want to work at cross-purposes."

"No," Sutherland shook his head. "I've kept close tab on him an' Thatcher all spring. They haven't made a move except the old game of throwin' back unbranded calves, which ain't criminal until they start usin' the iron. Ten years back I'd 'a' picked my own men an' treated Mark to a rawhide necktie or shot him like any other wolf. But takin' the law into your own hands ain't either necessary nor good policy no more. I'll have to think over this a while. He'll keep. When I figure out a move, I'll let you know. Meantime, go ahead your own way."

"The boys are kinda wishful to celebrate the Fourth," Robin said. "I might let 'em ride into Big Sandy. Where's the Block S round-up?"

"Finishin' up on the flats east of town," Sutherland told him. "They'll be in for the Fourth. There's to be some sports. I'd as soon you weren't there, kid. You're hot-headed. You might run foul of Mark. He *is* bad. Don't think he ain't because you made him weaken in the store that day. I wouldn't want you to go to hell in a fog of powder smoke from a cow thief's gun."

"I won't make no such finish. You can gamble on that," Robin answered. "Anyway the J7 riders may be in Big Sandy for the Fourth but I won't be among those present. I've got a good *segundo,* Tom Hayes by name. I'm goin' to let him run the outfit for a few days. Now, I'm goin' to ride. I could use a fresh horse."

"Tell the stableman to give you old Groaner," Sutherland said. "Good luck to you."

Robin turned in his saddle when he was mounted on a strapping bay, to look back at the house. A light glowed in the windows of a room he knew was May's. He hated to go without seeing her again. But until the issue between himself and Shining Mark was settled for good he could neither give himself up to love nor be easy in his mind. One thing at a time.

Yet it pleased him to know that Adam Sutherland trusted him without question. Sutherland was right. Men had to be trusted. Life was impossible without that faith. If here and there it was betrayed—no matter. He hadn't failed Mayne, for instance; old Dan had failed him, and so had Ivy. He wouldn't fail Sutherland. Riding alone in that dark and silent night Robin wondered if old Adam or May would draw back, lack confidence, grow cold, if some deadly pinch came. There was an uncomfortable chill in the possibility. But it wasn't even a possibility, Robin assured himself. Such a thing was unthinkable.

He shook off that slightly pessimistic mood and listened to the crickets, marked a waning moon peep through crevices in the cloud scud that wreathed the sky, as he covered mile after mile, riding fast and unwearied in spite of fifteen hours in the saddle. He wanted to catch his outfit at dawn, before the herd crossed the Judith River. He knew a way to hold those T Bar S's and yet free his riders for a holiday in town. They were a mettlesome bunch and they liked him; they would back him in anything. Robin valued that unquestioning loyalty. He wanted to hold that crew intact for the fall round-up, if—the ugly thought rose unbidden—he lived to boss the J7 through the autumn months.

CHAPTER XX

A MATTER OF BUSINESS

FROM the high level of the plain above the Judith River Robin looked back, gazing on the scene below and reflecting on the ease with which a range boss could arrange things to suit his own convenience, his own purposes. He knew now why Shining Mark had dared so much and felt so safe until the simple accident of a horse lamed and his rider set afoot had betrayed him. If Steele and Thatcher had not been emboldened by Shining Mark's absolute control of the Block S range, they would never have shot those Bar M Bar cows in order to steal their calves within twenty miles of home. If they had felt less secure and been a little more discreet Robin would never have dreamed the Block S round-up was run by a thief in his own interest. It was easy to take advantage of the wide trust and power a cow outfit must necessarily repose in men.

Adam Sutherland didn't know what he, Robin, was doing, what he might do if given full opportunity. It rested solely on the personal integrity of the man trusted. The response to that unqualified trust bred at once the peculiar devotion of the cow-puncher to his salt and by contrast gave rise to the sweeping depredations that once in a blue moon shook some individual cattle owner's faith in men.

"Here am I," thought Robin, as his eye dwelt on the Judith looping silver through a sage-gray and meadow-green valley in which the PN ranch buildings and the white tents of the J7 were mere specks, "here am I with the old man's check for five thousand in my pocket, another five or six thousand to my order in a Fort Benton Bank, and me hellin' off on a pure gamble—and the old man don't know anything about it."

He smiled soberly. His day herd of T Bar S's pastured under fence at the PN by special arrangement. His riders were off in a body to celebrate the Fourth in Big Sandy. Robin himself had a destination one hundred and fifty miles to the west,

on a project of his own. He might fail or he might succeed. Whether he failed or succeeded, Adam Sutherland would pay the freight. It was a matter undertaken largely in the interest of his employer—but there was also a touch of the very human motive of helping the piper present a peremptory bill to the sinister figure whose shadow had been lying more or less across Robin's path for a long year.

Robin rode west. In the middle of the afternoon he dropped into the valley of the Missouri river, clattered across the bridge and stabled his horse in Fort Benton. Once his hunger was satisfied he went straight to the sheriff's office. A Montana sheriff might be anywhere in his county at any moment, but luckily Robin found Tom Coats holding down a chair in his own sanctum. Robin's business was simple, requiring only certain explanations which made Coats open his eyes and readily promise secrecy and coöperation. When Robin departed he went as a duly sworn deputy of the Sheriff of Chouteau county, in the State of Montana, with certain papers in his pocket and a nickel-plated star to pin on if he chose to so ornament himself.

For several hours thereafter he cooled his heels in that little cow town awaiting a west-bound train which landed him in Helena shortly before midnight.

The hour suited his purpose. Ordinary business flourishes by day but the busiest and most profitable period of a saloon keeper's operations is—or was—likely to occur in the middle of the night. Like any other sound merchant a saloon man might be expected to attend his affairs in person during the peak—so Robin expected to find Bond behind his bar at that hour.

Bond, who proved to be elderly, stooped and rather saturnine in countenance, was totaling up figures at a desk behind the bar while a white-aproned employee waited on the customers. He rose to face Robin across the polished wood.

"Got a back room where we can talk?" Robin inquired.

"What kind of proposition you got that you have to talk private?" Bond asked. He seemed both doubtful and ill-humored.

Robin looked him coldly in the eye.

"One you might be inclined to listen to, if you got any interest in money—or cattle," he said slowly. "I'm from Chouteau county."

Bond led the way to a partitioned-off space in the rear. In one

small room five men in shirt sleeves sat around a green covered table, fingering chips in a stud poker game. In another two painted women and a man had their heads together over a round of drinks. Bond found an empty cubicle and motioned Robin to a seat. "What is it?" he asked curtly.

"You own the T Bar S brand, and you put a hundred and fifty head of stock on the range south of the Bear Paws two years ago, didn't you?"

Bond nodded.

"How many cattle you reckon you got down there now?"

"I don't know as that's any of your affair," Bond said disagreeably. "I ain't exactly sure, and I can't see why I should tell you if I was."

"Well, you don't have to, of course, right now anyway," Robin grinned. "Probably I know better than you do. It struck me that ownin' this brand ain't makin' you rich. I'd kinda like to buy that bunch of cattle."

"Ain't for sale," the man growled.

"Cattle are always for sale if the price is right," Robin answered equably. "You put in a hundred and fifty head. Your natural increase would be about eighty. On that basis, which is a fair percentage, you'd have about two hundred and thirty head. I'll buy the T Bar S on that estimate, at twenty dollars a head—let's see, that's forty-six hundred dollars—cash down."

"You're wastin' time," Bond made a move to rise.

"Sit down," Robin said peremptorily. "I ain't through."

Bond settled back in his seat. His expression was uneasy.

"Look here, Bond," Robin didn't like the man's shifty eye and it was easy for him to be harsh, "you're a saloon man. You never were anything else—not in Montana. You own a registered brand. You send a bunch of stock into the heart of a big cow-outfit's range. You never show up there yourself. You never had a man ride for you. You don't know how your calves get branded, nor how many. Maybe you trust in Providence. If you do Providence has been awful darn good to your stock—so darn good, that I come up here to see you about it. What's the answer?"

"I don't care to tell you anything about my business," Bond snarled. "I——"

"You might *have* to tell somebody about it one of these days,"

Robin interrupted. Bond stared at him uneasily.

"There's something queer about this T Bar S brand," Robin went on. "I sometimes dabble in queer things. I want to own it. I'm offerin' you a good price—I'll take my chances on gatherin' what I pay for. In fact I sort of want that brand for a bait. Will you sell? Better sell out than get froze out. Forty-six hundred is a nice bunch of coin all in a lump."

"I'd like to take you up," Bond declared. "But I can't."

"That brand's registered in your name," Robin challenged. "You're goin' to get into trouble over it."

"No I ain't," Bond defended. "I don't own it. Never did."

"Who does?" Robin demanded.

"I can't tell you."

"You might have to tell a judge and jury," Robin said bluntly.

Bond shifted in his seat, visibly nervous.

"Look," Robin continued. He turned back the lapel of his coat to reveal the deputy's badge. "I'm foreman of the J7 outfit on the Judith side of the Big Muddy. But I'm a deputy from Tom Coat's office besides. Tyler's my name. I got a blank warrant in my pocket. I don't punch cows or be a deputy sheriff for the fun of the thing. I know somethin' about this brand you're supposed to own. You'll either tell me who you're coverin' up or you'll go down to Fort Benton on the morning train. Take your choice."

"I dassent," Bond whined. "I don't know nothin' about cattle. Never owned a hoof. Havin' this T Bar S registered in my name was just a favor to a certain party. You can't put nothin' on me for that."

"Can't I? How much did you get for this favor—from this party?" Robin jeered. "Talk right out loud, Mr. J. Bond."

"A couple of hundred," Bond admitted, with sullen reluctance. "But you can't hang nothin' on me for that, either."

"Men have been hung for less in the cow country," Robin said grimly. "Who is this party?"

Bond shook his head stubbornly. "Hell!" he cried. "Why don't you grab the cattle and make him show his hand?"

Robin stared at the saloon man for a minute. Certain possibilities occurred to him on the heels of that remark. But he wanted something more definite. "Spit his name out," he said harshly. "I can guess it—but I want to hear you say it out loud."

Again Bond demurred, panic showing in his face.

"All right, then," Robin said and rose. "You come with me."

He wasn't afraid of Bond holding out to the bitter end. The man was too frightened.

"Oh, Lord," Bond threw out both hands despairingly. "If you got to know, why the feller that owns the T Bar S, that has owned them ever since that stock went down to the Bear Paws, is Mark Steele, range boss of the Block S."

"I expected he did. Now how does he hold title to 'em when you have the brand registered in your name?".

"I got the brand with money he furnished," Bond admitted sullenly. "Then I turned around and gave him a legal bill of sale. But he didn't want the brand transferred. He got me to hold it in my name."

"I see," Robin nodded. "An' what beef was shipped you collected the money an' paid it over to Mark. And so on."

He drummed on the table reflectively for a few seconds.

"Well, if Mark Steele owns the T Bar S I can't buy it from you, can I? You just forget we had this conversation until—well, if it should happen that Shinin' Mark got into trouble you might have to explain the circumstances of this bill of sale in court."

"If he was where he couldn't get at me, I'd like to wash my hands of the whole business," Bond said morosely. "He was up here this spring threatenin' all sorts of things if I ever opened my trap. He was worried about somethin'. I don't mind sayin' I'm scared of him. He's dangerous."

"I guess maybe he is," Robin agreed. "So you better never admit to him that you told me who owned the T Bar S. At the same time you better disown that brand. There's goin' to be a mix up over those cattle by and by. That's all. So long."

Robin walked out of the dive. It *was* a dive, subsisting on the border of the underworld, betraying its character at a glance. Robin was glad to get away from the place. Nevertheless he was glad he had bearded Jim Bond in this den of iniquity—which differed from the average cow town saloon as the floor of a pigsty differs from a Wilton rug—because he had gleaned an important fact or two, and one harassed remark of Bond's had suggested to him a plan which he thought worth trying.

CHAPTER XXI

A NEAR SHOWDOWN

ANOTHER rider jogged beside Robin Tyler when he rode out of Fort Benton the following day, a man about thirty, a typical cow hand one would say from a glance at his sunburned face, the easy effortless way he sat his horse, the completeness of his riding rig. Sam Connors was a cow-puncher, but he was also another of Tom Coat's deputies, a dark horse on the county pay roll, his status as an officer of the law remaining under cover for purposes best known to a sheriff whose security in a political job rested on affording protection to cattlemen against the occasional marauder who looked too longingly on stock not his own.

The J7 riders were all in camp. They had feasted, so to speak, won a roughriding contest in Big Sandy. They were very well pleased with themselves, with their wagon boss, with the world in general. They had rested for a couple of days and now with the impatience of youth they craved action.

They got it speedily. Robin reached camp at three in the afternoon. Before sundown he had bunched his day herd out of the PN pastures and made it breast the Big Muddy. He threw his horse herd over the river on the heels of the cattle, ferried his wagons on a scow borrowed from the PN, and set up his camp on the north shore.

At daybreak he led his riders on circle. For one week he shifted camp twice a day and swept the country for fifteen miles on either side as he moved, so that on the eighth day he had picked up every T Bar S ranging between lower Birch and Big Sandy Creek. He had by actual count over six hundred in his day herd and the scope of Shining Mark's operations loomed bigger than ever. There might be a few more scattered here and there on the Block S range, but Robin had enough for his purpose. He reckoned that Shining Mark's crew would be

taking a lay-off before beef round-up somewhere near the home ranch. When the swing of his gathering brought the J7 under the south slope of Shadow Butte, Robin left Tom Hayes in charge and rode for the Block S.

He wanted to see Adam Sutherland and he wanted to see Shining Mark—he wanted to get them together. He thought he would explode a sort of bomb and see what would follow. Mark might stand pat and say nothing—but he would do something, either at once or soon after. He might open war at sight. Robin didn't know how his tactics would result. The uncertainty keyed him up a trifle.

Probably his greatest desire was to see May, to feel her lissome body rest for a moment in his arms. There was a greater thrill in that expectation, a more riotous quickening of his pulse, than in the worst Mark Steele could do. Love was for Robin a far keener, a more disturbing emotion than hate—and he didn't hate Mark. He despised him. But despising the man did not, as Robin knew, make him any less formidable.

Dangerous or not, Mark Steele no longer had the power to make Robin grow moody as he stared out across the plains, nor to hush the song on his lips when he rode. He galloped now through the foothills lilting one of those interminable ditties every range rider knew, the saga of what befell a trail herd between the Staked Plains and the Canada line. The ground was dry and hot, the grass a crisp brown. All the delicate wild flowers, the tender green of spring, had vanished under the brassy glare of a midsummer sun. The streams were dwindling in their pebbly beds. Yet the old charm of the plains held good. That wide land had changed its aspect but intrinsically it remained the same, passing through its orderly cycle of blazing July heat, to verge into brown, still autumn—then white winter, and after that once more the green spring.

Robin came whistling down the slope into the home ranch. He noted the tents of the round-up on the creek below an irrigated meadow. He hoped both May and her father would be at home and not in town. When he drew up at the porch steps he saw that May, at any rate, was there. Her yellow head showed at an open window. She blew him a kiss with both hands and beckoned him to come in. Robin needed no second invitation.

"You glad to see me?"

"Glad?" The girl threw back her head and laughed happily. "Oh, Robin, you're funny. Are you blind?"

Robin's vision was keen enough. He could see the glow in her eyes, the flush that warmed her cheeks, and his ears drank in the note of gladness in her voice.

"Well, I like to hear you say it," he smiled. "Because I haven't much time to make love. I'm a foreign rider from a distant range and I've got to consult your father on business. Likewise I see the Block S camp on the creek, so I reckon Mr. Steele may be present, which makes me keep my weather eye open. Is the owner of the Block S around?"

Robin was standing with May in the bend of his arm. He kissed her with the last sentence—and started a trifle at the unexpected answer to the last question—since it came in the unmistakable deep tones of Adam Sutherland himself.

"Yes, the owner of Block S is around," he said. And after a second in which his daughter and his foreman looked at him in silence he continued harshly: "And it looks to me like it stands me in hand to be around."

May's head went up. The hand that rested on Robin's shoulder tightened a little in its grasp. Her color flamed. Her eyes took on a different brightness from the soft gleam that had welcomed her lover.

But Robin found his tongue first, forestalling her.

"You don't sound very pleased," he said quietly. "Do you reckon it's a crime for a man to love your girl?"

"From what I've heard you're kinda free and hasty in your lovin'," Sutherland replied.

Robin's face clouded.

"You have no right to say a thing like that," he returned.

"I got a right to say what suits me," Sutherland declared. "I don't know as you're the man I'd pick for my daughter."

"Your daughter," May broke in with unexpected passion in her voice, "will do her own picking when it comes to a man. You know that, dad. I've told you time and time again. I've been good and obedient in everything you've ever asked of me. But you can't do my marrying for me."

"It's come to that already, has it?" Sutherland muttered. He took off his hat and rolled it in his hands. His glance, bent

alternately on Robin and his daughter, was doubtful. But neither that dubious glance on his otherwise impassive, florid face, nor the tone of his voice, gave any clue to what lay in his mind. "You ain't lost no time. Talk about marryin'—a couple of kids!" he snorted suddenly. "I'll have something to say about that."

"Say it, then," Robin suggested. "Say it right now. Let's hear your kick on me as a man, if you have one."

"There's something else I want to talk about to you first," Sutherland said slowly. His glance flickered toward the south window. "This can wait awhile. Come out on the porch."

"Dad." May put her hands up on her father's thick shoulder. "You don't really think I haven't a right to pick my own man, do you? You're not going to make a mistake like that?"

"I never denied you much," he looked down at her. "But the man that gets you's got to be all wool an' a yard wide."

"You won't quarrel with Robin about me, will you?" she wheedled.

"No. He won't," Robin put in, his pride a little in arms at the idea of her pleading for him. "It takes two to make a quarrel."

"No, we won't quarrel," Sutherland answered. "There ain't goin' to be any argument, even."

"I want to see you before you leave," May said to Robin.

"You will," he told her. "I can promise you that."

"Are you sure you'll keep that promise?" old Adam's eyes narrowed as he asked the question.

"Yes," Robin said gently. His gaze, which had followed Sutherland's look through the window, noted Mark Steele standing by a porch column. He wondered how Steele had got there unheard and how Sutherland's heavy tread had not warned them of his coming. He had a flash of how completely love may absorb a man and dull his alertness for other things. Looking now at Shining Mark's head and shoulders limned against the sky he qualified his simple assertion. "Yes, if I'm on my feet and able to navigate."

Sutherland caught Robin's meaning.

"There ain't goin' to be no show-down—not yet," he said. "Come on."

May, too, had seen Steele.

"I don't like this," she said sharply. She caught Robin by the arm. "I don't want you to go out there and meet that man. You mustn't."

Robin shrugged his shoulders.

"I got to meet him here an' there, sometime," said he. "I never did really side-step him. I surely won't now."

"Listen, my girl," Sutherland frowned. "I'm boss of this layout. There'll be no private wars started here. There may be some talk but there'll be no shootin'. Tyler's right. He can't side-step. There's a matter of business to be talked about. You leave keepin' peace between these two to me."

May smiled and kissed her father brightly. Robin marveled at her easy assurance. He doubted even Adam Sutherland's power to avert a clash if Shining Mark made a move. That, it seemed to Robin, was a little beyond even a cattle king in the heart of his own domain.

"You run along, now," Sutherland told his daughter. She obeyed at once.

Robin moved toward the door. Almost instinctively he gave a little hitch forward to the gun scabbard on his belt. Sutherland stopped him with an imperative gesture.

"You heard what I said." His tone was pitched low, but lacked none of its habitual authority. "Don't you make no breaks. *He* won't. You let me walk out ahead."

Robin gave way to him. He didn't know what was coming, but he was ready for anything. If a little tension seized him he was nevertheless alert, mentally and physically prepared for the unexpected.

Shining Mark greeted him as casually as if nothing had ever risen between them. Robin looked at him in silence. He couldn't simulate that indifference. He wouldn't pretend. He kept his eye on Steele and his mouth shut. Mark shrugged his shoulders, looked at his employer.

"What I wanted to ask you," Sutherland turned to him and spoke, "was what you're doin' on my range with the J7 round-up?"

"Oh, well——" Robin scarcely hesitated. This was as good an opening as he wanted. It seemed almost as if Sutherland had made it for a purpose. He couldn't possibly know what Robin was there for, but he could not have led up to Robin's

opening gun more directly. "As a matter of fact I ambled up here partly to ask you if you had any objection to me combing your range—and partly to see if I could make a little deal in cows with you. I bought a bunch of cattle the other day. That's what I'm doin' this side the river; gatherin' 'em. I wouldn't mind sellin' 'em to you. I only bought them on spec."

Sutherland stared at him for a few seconds and Robin wondered if he would turn and rend him or follow the lead—if he would understand by any chance what Robin was driving at.

"I'll buy cows any time the price is right," he said. "You're sort of expandin', aren't you? What you got to sell?"

"The T Bar S brand. There's a lot of 'em clutterin' up your range."

"If I don't buy you out," Sutherland inquired, "what do you aim to do with 'em?"

"Oh, somebody else'll buy," Robin answered. "I don't aim to go into the cow business myself. The outfit I work for don't care to have its round-up foreman ownin' cattle."

"So you've bought the T Bar S and you want to sell it to me?" Sutherland commented thoughtfully.

Robin watched Steele closely during this exchange of talk. He saw Mark start when he named the brand, noted the flick of his eyelids. Beyond that the man gave no sign. He *was* cold-blooded, Robin thought.

"What's your price?" Sutherland asked.

"Eighteen dollars a head," Robin announced.

"How many head you estimate the T Bar S'll run?"

Robin could have hugged the old man for those pointed questions. If anything could galvanize Steele into word or deed that might expose his hand, that sort of thing would. Selling his own stock—no matter if they were stolen—over his head, before his own eyes.

"I can't say very close because I don't know how many more I'll pick up. Right now I've got between three and four hundred head."

Sutherland continued to stare at him hard.

"I might dicker with you," he said slowly. "Can you give me a legal transfer of the T Bar S brand?"

"I don't know why not," Robin said. "Anyway, I can deliver the cattle."

"I'll give you sixteen dollars."

Robin took a few seconds to consider this, in reality to watch its effect on Shining Mark. And the effect seemed to be nil—unless a slight twisting of his mouth meant anything more than a covert sneer.

"Split the difference," he suggested. "Make it seventeen."

"All right. It's a deal at seventeen," Sutherland agreed.

"I can depend on that?" Robin inquired.

Sutherland frowned.

"My word's never been doubted. What you mean?"

"Nobody's doubtin' it now," Robin smiled broadly. "I just wanted to be sure you wouldn't change your mind. I'll have the last of the T Bar S's picked up in a few days. Where do you want me to deliver?"

"Just a minute," Shining Mark broke in crisply. "Before you consider that deal closed I'd like to ask you who you bought the T Bar S from?"

"I don't know what your interest in the matter is," Robin answered him coolly. "But since you ask polite it's natural I'd buy from the man that owns it, Jim Bond of Helena."

"Have you got a bill of sale, and the brand transferred to your name?" Mark asked slowly.

Robin's lip curled as he looked at Steele and made his bluff good.

"I'm proceedin' to sell the T Bar S lock, stock an' barrel to Adam Sutherland," he said. "You can take it I know enough about the cow business to have a clear title."

"You can't sell nothin' wearin' a T Bar S to Sutherland or anybody else," Mark said very slowly and distinctly. He had drawn himself straight as an arrow. His mouth had an ugly twist. "If Jim Bond gave you a bill of sale for the T Bar S it ain't worth the paper the damned old crook wrote it on. He don't own it. He never did. The brand registry stood in his name, but I own the cattle and I can prove ownership. I've owned 'em ever since the time the T Bar S's were turned loose on this range. I give you notice right now. I can produce the papers for that. You won't deliver no T Bar S cattle to Adam Sutherland nor anybody else, Mr. Tyler."

Anger rang in his voice. Unquestionably Shining Mark was stirred. But he made no move beyond that defiant speech.

Robin, watching him closely, shrugged his shoulders.

"You may have the papers," he said insolently. "But I've got the cattle. I'll deliver 'em to the Block S."

Steele took a step forward. For a breath Robin thought Shining Mark meant to burn powder at last and he stiffened in his tracks, half turned, ready. But Mark controlled his temper. He, too, shrugged his shoulders. His lips parted, but before the words were uttered Sutherland faced him.

"So you claim to own the T Bar S brand?"

"I do own it," Mark said coolly.

"An' you've owned it for two years, here on my range, unknown to me? Hidin' behind another man's registry of the brand?"

"I have. You can put it that way if you like."

"I don't like it no way you put it, Steele," old Adam said. "If the J7 has gathered between three and four hundred in that brand there's a screw loose somewhere. I know how many head came in here two years back. That ain't a natural increase. You know what I mean."

"I can't help what you mean," Steele replied quite casually. He leaned against the porch column, cocked up one booted foot and played with the spur rowel. "If they've increased plenty so much the better for me. I own 'em. I can prove ownership. You can be suspicious if it suits you. If you think I've rustled you know what to do about that. You've handled rustlers before."

"You have rustled, by God—an' you've done worse!" Sutherland gritted.

Shining Mark looked at him unmoved.

"That's open to argument," he said brazenly. "You've got stock detectives. You've got men with eyes in their heads. They've been around me all the time. If you think you got a case, go ahead. I've got a clear conscience, Sutherland. And I own that T Bar S brand. Nobody's goin' to sell it but me—an' don't you forget that, Mr. Robin Tyler."

"I told you before you may have papers enough to choke a cow," Robin said. "But possession is nine points of the law, I've heard. I've got the cattle. I'll deliver 'em to the Block S. You can gamble on that."

"Maybe you will, maybe you won't," Shining Mark snarled.

"I'm here to tell you you won't. I'll tell you something more. I'll——"

"That's enough, Steele," Sutherland stepped between them. "You make a break on this porch and you'll go feet first off the ranch. You shut up an' ride while the ridin's good. An' keep ridin'."

"Oh, I'll ride off your ranch fast enough," Steele said with an ugly laugh. "But after that I'll ride where I damn please. This is a free country, Sutherland. You can't run me out of it because you don't like me to own stock on your range."

"I don't care a whoop about you ownin' stock on my range," Sutherland growled. "But it sure don't set well on my stomach to have a man I trusted turn out both a liar an' a thief."

Shining Mark laughed sardonically. He turned and clanked down the steps.

"Talk's cheap but it takes money to buy whisky," he flung back over his shoulder. "Say what you like. Think what you like. But don't monkey with my cattle or you'll burn your fingers—both of you."

He mounted and rode away. They watched him lope toward the round-up camp. In Robin's mind lurked a wonder as to what Shining Mark's next move would be. Steele would never lie down under that, Robin knew. He was too cool, too determined—so sure that he was safe that he could and would defy them. The hate in his eyes and voice spelled trouble to Robin's discerning eye.

Then he turned to find Sutherland steadfastly regarding him.

"I sure got a couple of enterprisin' wagon bosses," the old man said tartly. "One aims to steal my cattle and the other aims to steal my daughter."

CHAPTER XXII

CROSSED WIRES

THE likening of himself to Mark Steele as a marauder made Robin flush.

"Oh, is that so?" he said stiffly. "You put us in the same class, do you? You figure that me lovin' your girl and wanting her is the same as him stealin' your calves. I like that. I sure do!"

"I didn't mean it quite like that, kid," Sutherland stared absently after his thieving foreman. "But it don't seem like I can trust anybody any more."

"You can't trust me because I like May an' want her," Robin said hotly. "It don't occur to you that her wanting me has anything to do with it. I'm on the level with a thief because I want to marry your daughter, eh? What's the matter with me? Does a man have to be a millionaire and a hell-roarer and a parlor lion all rolled into one before you favor him as a son-in-law?"

"Not quite," Sutherland replied. "But he's got to be somethin', an' he ought to have somethin'. She's all I've got—an' she's just a kid. She owes me somethin', too. I've built up a fortune for her to have when I'm through. I got to be sure it's her, not the fortune, a man's after—an' that he is a man."

"I don't care a darn about your fortune," Robin said angrily. "I can make a fortune of my own, I reckon, if I get down to it. May's of age, anyway. If she's the kind of girl I think she is she'd like to have your blessin', but if it ain't to be had, in a pinch she'll do without it. You got no right to keep her in a glass case. And I don't think you can."

"You're just a couple of kids," Sutherland repeated. "I won't hear of it. I don't know whether you're the real thing or a false alarm, Tyler. I don't want to seem arbitrary, but you got to put this thing out of your mind if you work for me."

Robin shook his head.

"I can't do that," he answered soberly. "I couldn't do that even if I wanted to, even to please you. I'd like you to think I was the real thing. I don't know how I can do it any more than I have been doin'. I've had my heart set on her ever since the first time I saw her—an' I think it's the same with her. I'll play fair, but I won't back down an inch where she's concerned."

"You'll do this," Sutherland said decisively. "You won't see her no more till this Shining Mark business is settled. Then you'll have to show me you're capable of handlin' a big cow outfit, top an' bottom, inside out, before I'll hear of any marryin'. I've only the one kid. I've raised her well. I got to make sure she's makin' no blunder."

Some instinctive wisdom forbade Robin taking issue with that. He rebelled against Sutherland's attitude—yet saw dimly a certain justice on the older man's side. So he held his peace where his feelings urged him to headlong defiance. He had had to be patient before. He could be patient now.

And Sutherland, as if he had issued an edict which could not be gainsaid, returned to the business in hand.

"So," said he, "you took that five thousand dollars to buy the T Bar S? What's the idea, anyhow?"

"I did and I didn't," Robin brought his mind back to cattle and Shining Mark. "I went up to Helena prospectin'. I ran a sort of whizzer on old Jim Bond and found out what I wanted to be sure of. Mark owns the T Bar S right enough, did from the beginnin'. Bond's just a cover, an' he admitted that. Then I crossed the Missouri an' worked some range. I've still got your check. I didn't buy 'em, of course. I thought maybe I could do that, an' ball Mark up that way. But I didn't need to. I was simply runnin' another bluff on Steele because you gave me a good chance. I couldn't sell the T Bar S to you, lawful. But thinkin' I might'll make him do *somethin'*. I don't know but you could put him in the pen right now—since he's claimed ownership. As a matter of fact, by actual count, I've got six hundred odd T Bar S cattle in my day herd right now, at Shadow Butte. That number just naturally proves most of 'em stolen. A hundred and fifty head mixed stock don't double up twice in two years."

Sutherland grunted something unintelligible. He ran his

stubby fingers through his grizzled hair and looked at Robin. He did not say Robin had done well or ill. He simply looked —deeply interested, very thoughtful.

"There's a few more I expect, scattered around," Robin continued. "Do you want me to get 'em all?"

Sutherland didn't answer that question directly.

"I expect Mark feels dead safe," he muttered. "He hasn't run his iron on anything this spring. I guess we couldn't make out a clear case if it come to a trial. I thought—I kinda—an' we got to connect him up with shootin' Tex Matthews yet."

He stood in a brown study.

"If he stands pat on what he's got, an' walks a chalkline, we can't do nothin'," he said at last. "Your word alone, an' circumstantial evidence, won't put him where I want him, Tyler."

"He won't stand pat," Robin prophesied. "I won't let him, for one thing. I'll never be safe on this range with him holdin' out at Mayne's. I've troubled Shinin' Mark too long an' too much. He'll try to get me one way or another. I can see that in his eye every time I look him in the face. He'll never give up the T Bar S. And I've got 'em. My hunch is to keep 'em. I'd run the Block S on every hoof, an' see what he'd do about it. Do you want me to hold those cattle? Two-thirds of 'em he stole from you. Are you goin' to let him get away with them—and more?"

Sutherland ripped out an oath.

"I won't let him sit like a wolf in his den at the Bar M Bar," he declared. "I'll buy Mayne out. I'll give him all his outfit is worth. If he won't sell I'll freeze him out. An' Steele won't have no hold out or herd to cover up with. But about these T Bar S's—I don't know. Law's law—when it comes to property. You can't just grab 'em."

"But I *have* grabbed 'em," Robin declared. "The original idea in my mind was to prove to you that he was a darned thief. Then I went ahead an' gathered those cattle, gathered and held them on my own responsibility as boss of the J7—just to make Mark show his teeth. He will—he can't help it if he thinks I'm out to beat him at his own crooked ame."

A queer gleam showed in Sutherland's eyes.

"That's up to you," Robin added. "I've run the outfit in

your interest. If you don't want me to use my own judgment, tell me what you want done. Say what you want me to do with those stolen cattle."

"Hold 'em," Sutherland said briefly. "Gather all you can find. Outside of that use your own judgment. I want to nail that murderin' thief—both of 'em."

"I guess that's all, then," Robin said after a brief silence. "I want to speak to May like I promised. Then I'll ride."

"You got to promise me you won't be seein' her on the quiet," Sutherland persisted. "You're young an' you're good-lookin'. I don't know how much more there is to you."

"If there was no more to me than that," Robin retorted, "I wouldn't be runnin' a round-up for you."

"You might be a top cowman an' still be darned poor timber for a husband," Sutherland observed. "A girl's judgment don't go far. I got to know you better."

"Hell, a fellow would think it was you I aimed to marry, not your girl," Robin sputtered, "the way you want to be so sure I'm all wool and a yard wide."

"It's all in the family," Sutherland grinned slightly, for the first time in their conversation. "I think a heap of that kid. I don't aim for her to take no chances if I can help it. Is it a promise?"

"Yes," Robin agreed. "I know I have to attend to my work. But seein' me once in a while is more her affair than yours, I think. If May wants to have it that way, yes. And only as long as she wants to have it that way."

Sutherland fished a cigar out of his pocket, bit off the end with utmost deliberation.

"I'll give you ten minutes with her," he said. "You tell her what I said."

Old Adam was still nursing the unlighted cigar when May and Robin came out on the porch ten minutes later, ten minutes precisely by the clock.

"Good-by," Robin said to her. "I'm on my way."

She put her face up to be kissed and Robin kissed her without regard to her male parent. Then she went back into the house. He stood a moment.

"You got no particular orders for me, I suppose?" he inquired.

"No. I told you to use your own judgment. It'll be two weeks before beef round-up starts. We'll see what breaks by then."

Robin went jingling his spurs down the porch steps. At the bottom Sutherland halted him with a word.

"Look, kid," he said. "You keep your eyes peeled for Mark. The minute you think you've got him right—you call on Tom Coats. Don't go takin' the law into your own hands."

"All right." Robin smiled to himself. "I guess I won't do nothin' rash."

He had not told Sutherland that he already had one of Tom Coats' men on hand for just such an emergency, nor that he, himself, was clothed in the majesty of such law as Chouteau county afforded. That was his own affair.

He rode away, not altogether happy, but fairly hopeful. He had truthfully repeated Sutherland's ultimatum to May and she had counseled patience.

"I know him so well," she said. "If we defy him he might never forgive us. I think he likes you well enough, Robin. But he has often hinted at ambitious things for me. There was never a man paid me any attention that he approved of. He has always made everything come out the way he wanted and he can't somehow think of me as a woman with definite ideas of life for herself—only as a little girl that he's raised. So be patient, Robin. Don't make me a bone of contention. I will see you now and then, all open and above-board. If in the end we have to take the bit in our teeth, we'll do so. I'm game. I'd turn my back on anything for you. But if you could be the son he's never had, it would be better—for all of us."

And Robin had agreed; the more readily since he had a pride of his own and Sutherland had touched it deeply. He *would* show this cattle king that a man could amount to something even if he were not of the pastoral blood royal that counted its cattle on a thousand hills. And there was Shining Mark to be coped with, one way or another before he, Robin Tyler, could ever ride at ease in the Bear Paws or lie down to sleep at night with no care in his mind. Neither task would be easy; the second held as great an element of personal danger as it did when Robin rode for Mayne. It seemed to him that as his career and outlook expanded life grew more complicated, clashes more inevitable, responsibilities greater. But he had no mind

to shirk anything that loomed on his horizon.

He reached his camp by Shadow Butte, slept on his plans, and flung his riders abroad at dawn. Their circle brought them near the Bar M Bar. Robin turned off all but Sam Connors and jogged with Sam down by his own cabin to have a look. He paused a second on the bank above to have a look around. Wild cattle were streaking westward before the J7 riders. The Mayne ranch lay in the creek bed, a huddle of buildings and corrals. Robin wondered, as he dropped into the flat, if Shining Mark had transferred himself to the Bar M Bar now that Sutherland had kicked him out.

He and Connors rounded the cabin. Before the door a saddle horse that Robin knew stood with reins on the ground, head drooping in the bright morning sun. On the little stoop Ivy Mayne sat nursing her chin in cupped palms. She looked up as they drew rein, sprang to her feet and held out both hands.

"Oh, Robin, Robin!" she cried. "I was thinkin' about you."

Her cheeks were tear stained. The look on her face gave Robin a pang. And there was nothing he could do or say—nothing. He knew that. He sat in his saddle, silent. Sam Connors glanced at the girl, at Robin.

"I'll ride on a ways," he said and was gone before Robin could stay him or bid him go. His own instinct was to ride on—and still—he couldn't be brutal in the face of her distress. Ivy held out her hands again.

"Get down, Robin, and talk to me—please," she begged. "Please."

He dismounted.

"I was a fool." The words tumbled out of her hysterically. "Come back, Robin. I want you."

She flung herself at him. Robin caught her by the shoulders, held her at arm's length, looked down at her sorrowfully.

"Get hold of yourself," he commanded. "Don't act crazy. You don't want me. You'd 'a' kept me when you had me, if you'd wanted. You can't play with a man, discard him, and pick him up again, just as you take the notion. You know that. What's the matter with you?"

She turned away from him with a stifled sob.

"Oh, I know, I know," she wailed. "I've lost you. I *am* crazy. I've always been crazy. I ought to kill myself an' I haven't got

the nerve. Oh Robin, Robin, I wish I was dead!"

She sank into that huddled posture on the step and cried in a way that made Robin ache. Then suddenly, while he wondered if it were wise or kind to say more, or if it would be better to ride away and leave her, she stopped weeping, looked up at him.

"I didn't mean what I said," she whispered. "I don't know why I said it. I know you haven't any use for me an' I don't blame you. I am about crazy, Robin. You better ride along. Mark Steele's ragin' around this country somewhere."

"He was at the Block S yesterday an' he didn't seem particularly ragin' when I was around," Robin said quietly. "Has somethin' happened?"

"He's got me in trouble an' just laughs at me," she said wearily. "I don't know what I'm goin' to do. Dad'll just about kill me when he finds out. Or he'll go after Mark an' get killed himself."

"He can't give you the worst of it that way," Robin fairly sputtered. "He promised to marry you, didn't he?"

"Yes, but that's nothin' to him," she sighed. "Promises don't mean nothin' to Mark Steele. I took care of him last winter when he was shot, like he was a baby. He fixed it up to buy a half interest with dad this spring when he fell into that money. He's backed out of everything. He rode in last night fairly foamin' about somethin'. He had some things there he wanted. He got 'em an' rode away an' as good as told us both to go to hell. He was wild. I never saw him so ugly."

Robin could easily guess the fury that raged in Steele once he had time to think, feeling himself checkmated, his liberty as well as the fruits of his crafty stealing endangered by Robin's latest move. But that was no matter to be discussed with Ivy. He was sorry for her—but—— She looked at him and her lips quivered. Then a curious gleam lit her dark eyes.

"If you hadn't met that tow-headed Sutherland girl, this wouldn't 'a' happened," she blazed out at him.

There was no dealing with that oblique reasoning. Robin knew Ivy's wayward moods of old. He made a little impatient gesture. Ivy rose.

"I'm goin' to the Block S one of these days an' tear her eyes out," she said passionately.

"Look," Robin said sternly. "You had me. You could always have had me. I'd 'a' stuck through anything. But he came along when I was hoein' a hard row. You got to despisin' me an' admirin' him. That's all there is to it. When I came back after jumpin' the country because I thought I'd killed him, you had dropped me like a hot potato. Don't go blamin' another woman for somethin' you did yourself, because you wanted to."

"Both of 'em." Ivy gritted her white teeth. "I got it in for both of 'em, her an' Mark. He could a' left me alone, an' she could 'a' left you alone an' it would 'a' been all right. I hate them both. I have a mind to ride to the Block S and shame 'em before everybody. That's what I started out to do this mornin'."

"Better turn around an' go home," Robin counseled. "No good actin' like a crazy woman. Go home an' make a clean breast of it to the old man an' let him deal with Shinin' Mark."

"He's afraid. Everybody's afraid of Mark Steele," she sneered. "He'd say I was to blame for givin' in, an' he'd about kill me. All he thinks anything of is his cattle. He's wild now because Mark backed out of the partnership. Says Mark's a darned cheatin' cow thief."

"He is, too," Robin said coldly. "Only he's as bad as Mark because he knew that long ago."

"Oh, I don't care what he is," she cried. "I don't care. I'm so near crazy I don't care who is what, or what happens."

"No good feelin' like that," Robin tried to soothe her. "Go home an' try to settle down an' forget it. You ain't the first girl that trusted a man that was no good. You're better off without him."

Ivy began to whimper again. Against that flood of rage and grief and fear Robin was helpless. He was sorry, but there was nothing he could do. He had his own crow to pick with Mark Steele. Ivy's plight added only a more burning contempt to the score already laid against the man. So far as he was concerned Ivy Mayne and the Bar M Bar was a closed book.

"I got to go," he said gently. "Don't cry. Don't worry. You'll come out all right. So long."

He swung up on his horse. Ivy made no move to stay him. Only she looked up at him with big dusky eyes in which a fire glowed, the old dumb sullen protest that he remembered when she was crossed in her desires.

Sam Connors waited for him on the crest of the opposite bank. Robin joined him, rode a little way, and looked back. Ivy had mounted, she was galloping away from his cabin—but not toward home. She took to the bench land above the creek. As far as Robin watched her she loped steadily north—straight toward the Block S.

He remembered her threat, wondered if she would try to make it good, and the thought made him a little sick at heart. Shining Mark wouldn't be at the Block S. Ivy was just frantic enough to do anything, say anything. The storm in her breast was driving her mad.

He shook up his horse and bore away toward the round-up ground where the J7 riders had bunched their cattle. He worked that herd with a troubled mind. There were too many crossed wires. A sense of something like impending disaster harassed him far into the night. Long after the cook was snoring in the opposite corner of the chuck tent Robin lay staring at the canvas overhead, listening to the faint jingle of bells among the grazing *remuda,* hearing the night wind flutter the guy ropes.

In his mind there suddenly flashed up the picture of Shining Mark sagging to his knees that frosty afternoon in the Birch Creek line camp.

"I wish to God I *had* killed him that time," Robin thought. "I'll have to kill him yet. He's done more damage already than any man should do an' live."

It was, Robin felt sadly, a little late for purely vindictive reprisal. But there was still such a thing as simple justice, which must somewhere, sometime, overtake such a man as Mark Steele.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE BACKWASH

THE J7 took a short swing eastward, turned back when T Bar S's grew scarce, and pitched camp one evening on Birch Creek below Cold Spring within sight of where Robin first saw with a shock of surprise the flash of silver on a rustler's gear. The Bad Lands lay in a tumbled stretch below. A few thickets of jack pine spotted the valley walls, made dark patches about the heads of those torn gulches. Birch Creek was a mere trickle in its alkali bed. It was like the jaws of hell for heat in that deep, sage-floored bottom. At dawn, when the riders saddled and mounted, the air was cool and scented with the odor of bruised sage.

Robin sat half-turned in his saddle watching the wagons vanish up the steep pitch of a draw that led to high ground. The day herd and the saddle bunch climbed the slope in long files. Very soon he would finish that gathering. In and around Chase Hill he expected to end the clean-up. After that—he was wondering what would come after that, as he sat there.

Some of his riders sat quietly resting gloved hands on their saddle horns. Some rolled a final cigarette. Two or three were giving the last tightening to their cinches.

Something stung Robin in the side, like a hornet, or the touch of a live coal. Involuntarily he flinched. The prick of his spur, the lurch of his body, startled the nervous brute under him. Touch and movement were simultaneous. Already off balance, when the horse spun like an uncoiled spring, Robin lost his seat—went headlong to earth, precisely as if he had been shot. That was no mere conjecture flashing through his brain as he fell. He saw a dust spurt rise twenty feet beyond him while he was yet in mid-air. And he lay still where he had fallen, listening for a sound that made the tale complete—the clear, staccato report of a rifle.

Every detail of what occurred, every possibility, stood clear in Robin's mental and visual processes. He saw two other horses jump and swerve at the spurt of dust. He knew where his own horse stood when the shot was fired, and so marked the line of the bullet's flight, a point on the eastern bank three hundred yards distant, perhaps three hundred feet above the flat, a spot masked by a clump of scrubby pines.

He did not rise. He did not move. He lay watching, and his riders flung themselves off their horses to gather around him. His fall and that crack told them the story.

"Are you hurt bad?" they cried.

"Never mind me," Robin said. "Look. See that bunch of pine? That's where he fired from. Go get him. Get him alive if you can, but get him. Spread out and burn the earth. Quick, or he'll slip you in the rough country."

One man stayed with him, knelt beside him. The others flung themselves astride, broke away on the run, spreading fan-wise as they rode. Every man was armed. Robin had seen that they rode armed once they crossed the Big Muddy. Two or three carried rifles under their stirrup leathers. Robin smiled to himself as the dust rolled out from under those drumming hoofs.

"He'll have to go some to get away. And if he does he'll think he got me," he reflected. Then, in answer to Jim Stratton's anxious query:

"I don't know. I don't feel as if I was finished. But somethin' sure stung me. Guess I'll look."

Baring his waist showed a red line like a scar of a brand, where the bullet had seared his skin.

"Now that's what I'd call close," Robin commented. "Darned if it didn't feel like it had plowed right through me. She sure stings but don't amount to much. Get my horse, Jim. I'm all right."

Stratton galloped over to where Robin's mount after a brief bolt stood still on the fallen reins. He led him back, Robin got up, mounted, nursing that sharp pain in his side and a bruised shoulder from the fall, but practically unharmed.

"We'll join the hunt," he said briefly, and rode for the eastern bank.

Empty bench land, brown and yellow with ripe grass, a net-

work of coulees, canyons, ravines, clumps of pines, great areas of sagebrush, the Bear Paws looming high and blue on the north, met their gaze. No riders moved in sight, only a few bunches of wild cattle stirred to flight by the pursuit.

"Hark!" said Stratton, after a minute. "They've opened the ball."

A burst of shots rose, echoed, died away. The plains silence closed in again. The morning air fanned their faces, rippled the long grass. They waited, watching, five minutes, ten, half an hour, the sun dazzling their eyes as they looked to the east.

"There they come," Robin pointed.

Two miles off a group of horsemen debouched from a hollow, riding slowly. Robin and Stratton loosed their mounts to a gallop.

On a horse led by Sam Connors and flanked by the J7 riders sat Tommy Thatcher. He was disarmed, hatless, his hands tied behind his back. A smear of blood streaked his face. He rode a J7 horse and the rider of that horse sat riding double behind another man's cantle. The J7 men grinned widely at Robin and Robin stared at Thatcher.

"Lucky we were," Sam Connors said. "We dropped his horse at long range an' Mr. Man went down so hard he didn't come to till we closed in on him."

"I busted him one when he started to get gay," said the rider who was mounted double, "so they made me give him my horse, they was so kind to him. I'd 'a' made the skunk trot at the end of a lass-rope. What'll we do with him, Tyler? Name your poison."

Robin lifted his hat and ran his fingers through the mat of his curly hair. He didn't speak to Thatcher. The man stared at him in dumb fear.

"First it was shootin' cows to steal their calves. Then it was Tex Matthews. Now it's me," he mused. Aloud, he said:

"Bring him down into the creek."

They plowed up the loose earth on the steep bank, gained the sage-gray bottom. Where the canyon from Cold Spring joined Birch Creek three gnarly old cottonwoods grew, a trio like the weird sisters. They stood within half a mile of where Mark Steele and Thatcher shot the Bar M Bar cows. Robin remembered those trees. He led the way until his riders were

bunched in the leafy shade. Thick, crooked limbs spread from the rough-barked trunks fifteen feet above ground.

"Heave a rope over that branch," Robin pointed.

The Texan's face blanched. For a second or two the J7 men looked startled.

"I sure do despise a bushwhacker," one reckless youth said at last. "I'll donate my rope in a good cause."

He flung the noosed end deftly over a stout limb.

"Lead him under," Robin spoke again.

Connors gave the lead rope to a J7 man, wheeled his horse aside and sat looking thoughtfully at Robin. The J7 man led the horse Thatcher bestrode under the dangling noose.

"Put it around his neck. Tighten it up and tie the end to the tree," Robin ordered.

Robin's young face was hard as iron. He looked at the shrinking Texan and there was no mercy in his eyes. The horse that bore Thatcher was gentle. He stood passive, a living scaffold, such as the old West devised for the speedy execution of malefactors long before Robin Tyler was born. A flick of a rope-end and the beast would leap from under, to leave Thatcher's spurred heels kicking three feet clear of mother earth. Robin raised his braided quirt. Thatcher's lips trembled.

"For God's sake, Tyler, take this rope off my neck!" he pleaded. "Give me a chance for my life. I'll talk."

"What chance did you give Tex Matthews or me?" Robin sneered. "You're not gagged. Speak out if you want."

"Take away the rope," Thatcher begged. "I'll cough it all up, if you won't hang me here. Shinin' Mark's the man you want, not me."

"Say what you want," Robin answered coldly. "I make no promises. It's hangin' or the pen for you, anyway."

"If I hang, I want him to hang with me," the Texan mumbled. "He got me into this. I'll take a chance on the penitentiary if you'll keep me off'n this tree."

"Say your say," Robin lowered his quirt.

"Steele's been rustlin' off the Bar M Bar an' the Block S for two seasons, brandin' what he stole with the T Bar S, which he owns on the quiet. I've been in with him from the start. He got a hold over me an' I had to go through. At first we shot the cows, like we did that day a year ago in this here bottom,

when you rode down an' looked for the brand on that cow. It was Mark took a crack at you that day. Mostly we cut back cows with big calves an' separated 'em later. We had a corral in the Bad Lands down toward Cow Creek where we got in our work late in the fall. A lot of the stuff we threw across the Missouri on the ice. It was Steele shot Tex Matthews when we got onto you fellers prowlin' down there. He tried to get you too. An' we was lookin' for you, figurin' how we could get away with you the time we walked in on you asleep in the Birch Creek line camp—the day you turned Mark's gun back on him an' shot him in the neck.

"When you jumped the country thinkin' you'd killed him, he figured it was all clear. When you come back this spring he was scared to rustle, and he was leary of jumpin' you in public. He began to think you was tougher game than he'd reckoned. Then he got worried when he knew you was runnin' the J7 round-up in the Judith because he knew you'd come on lots of T Bar S yearlin's. When you blew into the Block S the other day an' made that play about havin' bought the T Bar S an' undertook to sell it to Sutherland, he knew the stuff was off an' he had to claim ownership. He figured he could bluff Sutherland since there wasn't enough proof to convict him. But he was afraid you'd either keep on his trail until you got evidence, or you an' Sutherland would just naturally grab every T Bar S in sight an' hold 'em in spite of hell. So he foamed around after Sutherland fired him an' decided we had to kill you first chance an' that would be the end of it. You were the only man in the country that really knew how it was worked. So he put it up to me to ambush you. I've been layin' for you for three days. That's all. I'll swear to that in court if you take him alive."

The J7 men had crowded close to listen.

"By the Lord," one growled. "You sure ought to hang. A cow thief an' a murderer. Will I hit old Bones a clip, Robin?"

"Untie the rope," Robin said calmly. "We'll let the sheriff of Chouteau county hang him an' Shining Mark together."

"One other thing," Robin said when Thatcher's neck was free of the noose. "Where is Mark Steele now?"

"I dunno. I expect," Thatcher mumbled, "he'll be around somewheres in public establishin' a alibi for himself, in case

he got accused of shootin' you. I've had to do the dirty work."

"All right." Robin nodded to Sam Connors. That individual moved up beside Thatcher.

"You're under arrest by a qualified officer," he said pleasantly. "We'll treat you nice, an' have you safe in jail at Fort Benton inside of twenty-four hours. So behave yourself."

"Listen," Robin addressed his crew. "You've heard his yarn. It's true. I've been up against this for a year. Keep your mouths shut tight about all this until you're called in court as witnesses. Shinin' Mark won't be as easy to handle as this fellow. Now, two of you ride, one on each side of him, to camp."

They moved off in a cavalcade. Sam Connors fell in beside Robin, looking curiously at him.

"If he hadn't weakened would you 'a' hung him?" he asked at last.

"I don't know," Robin answered truthfully. "Maybe. But he did weaken."

"You had me guessin'," Connors observed. "I couldn't hardly 'a' stood for a lynchin'. Did you figure he'd squeal when you made that hangin' play?"

"Yes," Robbin admitted. "That's why I made it. I've got 'em both dead to rights now. Next thing is to round up Shinin' Mark Steele. Then this range'll be clean once more."

CHAPTER XXIV

SNIPPED THREADS

ON A little hillock that gave a clear view all around Robin pulled up his horse. He rode alone. Now of all times he must be wary. Thatcher had failed. If Steele knew Thatcher had not only failed but had confessed his sins to save his neck, he would certainly be in the mood to take a desperate chance. He *might* be riding the hills on the same errand as Thatcher. So Robin looked well from all the high ground and rode fast in the low places. There was no shame in being cautious. A second bullet might not simply graze him.

Over westward he could see a little dark cluster moving rapidly across the rolling land. That was Sam Connors and his prisoner with two J7 men for bodyguard. Connors could make the evening train by riding hard. Nightfall would see the Texan safe in the county jail. Nightfall, Robin hoped, would also see Mark Steele at the end of his tether. The blank warrant in his pocket Robin had already filled in. He meant to leave no loopholes because he meant to take Mark Steele wherever he found him. If Mark anticipated his purpose and resisted then the outcome was on the knees of the gods.

Shining Mark might be at the Bar M Bar; he might be at the Block S camp, he might be in town. He was bold and crafty. He might indeed be anywhere, but in those three places in the order named Robin proposed to look for him. He had a grim satisfaction to stiffen his purpose. There was no loophole left for Shining Mark now. Robin had been patient, he had endured much, and he did not love his enemies.

Steele was not at the Bar M Bar. Neither was Mayne nor his daughter. A ranch hand told Robin they had gone to town. He bore on up to the Block S. The round-up tents stood white on the green border of an irrigated meadow but the Sutherland riders knew nothing of Mark. Jack Boyd did inform Robin that

old Adam and May had departed in the buggy three or four days earlier. Robin knew that the bay trotters were likely to have but one destination.

"Me for Big Sandy," he reflected—and borrowed a fresh horse out of the Block S *remuda.*

Thus mounted he burned the earth, in range parlance, toward town. As he rode his personal danger from ambush became less of moment than the possibility of Mark Steele slipping through his fingers. Mark would do one of two things the moment he learned that Thatcher had been taken red-handed; either he would go gunning for Robin or he would jump the country. He had money. That inheritance of fifteen thousand dollars which he had *not* put into the Bar M Bar partnership would take him far and fast—if he chose to own himself beaten and quit the field.

That contingency worried Robin. He had made two definite promises both to himself and Shining Mark, one in anger, the other in cold blood, to kill him or put him in the penitentiary. He meant to keep one or the other.

In the freshness of his anger that morning with Thatcher's fear-wrung story to cap the climax, Robin had set out to take his man single-handed.

Now, as he loped out of the foothills, he was not so sure of the wisdom of that plan. To act alone savored a little of satisfying a personal grudge, which he admitted to himself—and he reflected that making Steele's arrest a personal, single-handed affair might easily permit Mark to evade justice altogether.

Wherefore, by the time town loomed in the tenuous heat haze that quivered above a parched earth, Robin had decided to consult Adam Sutherland first. He could still grab Steele wherever he found him, but perhaps the entire machinery of the sheriff's office had better be in motion. Montana covered a lot of territory. If Shining Mark went on the dodge he would take some catching.

So he rode to the store on an angle that took him between the stockyards and the rows of houses that formed the one short street. A clerk stood in the door that Robin had to pass on his way to the front. He pulled up.

"Sutherland inside?"

"Went over to the house a while ago," the man told him.

Robin didn't tarry. In two minutes he was striding up the front steps of the white cottage. Sutherland rose out of a chair behind a canvas screen. May appeared in the doorway.

"Come on inside," Sutherland said. "What's up?"

"How do you know anything's up?" Robin asked when he doffed his hat in the cool room. He stole a look at May. She smiled welcome but there was a sort of shadow in her blue eyes, a something Robin had never seen there, a troubled, apprehensive expression.

"I see two of your men with Sam Connors an' that Texican ride in just as the west-bound stopped. Connors an' Thatcher took the train. Your two boys say they just rode in for fun. You come ridin' a Block S horse all sweat an' foam."

"You notice things, don't you," Robin drawled. "Well, somethin' is up. Do you happen to know if Mark Steele is in Big Sandy?"

A look flashed between father and daughter.

"I don't spend no time keepin' track of Mark myself," Sutherland said dryly. "Maybe he is. Maybe he isn't. Why? Sit down an' spin your yarn."

Robin spun it briefly.

"So I took a second thought and figured two heads was better than one," he ended. "Maybe it'll be as well to stir up Tom Coats and notify the other county officers, so they'll all be on the lookout for him if he hides out. If he does happen to be in Big Sandy or rides in here I'll drop my own loop on him. If he don't know we got Thatcher he'll feel safe to go anywhere."

"Hm—m." Sutherland nursed his chin in one hand, twirled and tugged by turns at his mustache. He looked first at Robin, then at his daughter. His expression told nothing. He rose at last.

"You've done a good stroke of business, kid," he said. "I'll amble over an' send a wire to Fort Benton. You stay here."

"I ought to stable my horse," Robin took thought. "I sure rode him hard."

"He'll keep. Block S saddle stock is used to hard ridin'," Sutherland observed. "I won't be gone but a minute or two. I want to talk this over with you some more. You stay right here till I come back. I guess May won't mind."

"All right," Robin agreed. He had to suppress a self-conscious grin at the last sentence. He didn't know why Sutherland took that tack, unless May had worked some magic on him. But Robin certainly didn't think she would mind.

May flung herself into his arms the moment her father was out the door.

"Glad to see me?" Robin asked with a tender smile.

She nodded, her head on his breast.

"I worry about you now I know you're this side of the river." She lifted her head to look into his face. "That man is deadly—deadly and despicable. Ivy Mayne came up to the ranch one day last week."

"Yes? I met her at my old homestead one morning. She was pretty wild then. She started off toward the Block S, but I didn't think she'd go through."

"She was nearly insane with fear and grief," May told him soberly. "And she blurted out all her troubles to dad and me when she found Mark wasn't there. Did she tell you what was wrong, Robin?"

He nodded.

"Poor thing! She's a queer, awfully intense creature, and foolish—but it is rather terrible for her, Robin. I'm so sorry."

"So am I," Robin murmured. "But I can't do anything about it, that I know of."

"I can't do much but I'm going to do what I can. Ivy's here now."

"Here in your house?"

"Yes," May nodded. "In one of the bedrooms. I've got her calmed down from that frenzy she was in. I'm going to take her away to Helena. Her father doesn't know. He's a poor stick anyway. He's been raving to dad all morning about this wretched cattle business. And——"

She stopped suddenly. Her arms tightened about Robin.

"You're an angel," he whispered.

"You were fond of her, weren't you, Robin?" she muttered.

"That was before I knew you," Robin answered slowly. "And I guess it wouldn't have amounted to anything anyway. Mark was always in her mind more or less. I did like her, though. You've liked other men before you ever saw me, I guess, hon?"

"Not much. Well, yes, I once liked a boy who broke horses

for us long before I knew you, Robin," she said honestly. "He was a rider like you. A horse fell with him and killed him. I thought a lot of him. But somehow not the way I think and feel about you, dear."

Robin kissed her.

"I guess maybe it was the same with both of us," he said. "We were both lookin' for somebody we wanted. I had the feelin' that I'd found something real the first time I met you—the night we rode up the hill above Little Birch and talked while the sun went down. Remember?"

"Yes," she smiled. "I had the same feeling about you—and it grows stronger. I'll be glad when that murdering thief is dead or in jail. I'm afraid for you Robin. You've taken so many chances. You may not always be lucky. What would I do if anything happened to you, Robin?"

"I've got to take chances," Robin declared. "A man has to. Mark is about at the end of his rope now. He's overplayed his hand."

May shuddered a little.

"Yes," she sighed, "but he's still in the game."

"I wonder if he *is* in town," Robin's eyes hardened.

"It isn't your place to go after him if he is," she demurred. "Let the county officers get him. He'll try to kill you, if it's the last thing he does."

"By jiminy!" Robin put his hands on her shoulders and looked at her searchingly. "I believe he is in town an' you know it. Your dad knows he's here?"

May flushed.

"Steele is in Big Sandy," she admitted. "He's been here since yesterday drinking and—and——"

Robin turned. May caught him with both hands.

"Robin!" she cried. "No. You promised dad you'd stay here till he came back."

"While I stand here talkin' Steele may be ridin'," Robin said. "Gettin' him is my job. If I didn't owe it to him, I'm an officer. I got myself deputized to have the law on my side. Even if I wasn't I'd go after him anyway. He rode me rough. He murdered a good friend. He's a thief. I will get him—alive if I can; but I'll get him if he's here."

"I know, I know," May pleaded. "I wouldn't have you shirk.

But wait till dad comes back. He's old and very wise, Robin, and he likes you. If he says you should go ahead and arrest Mark Steele I won't say another word."

They stood for a second or two, clasped close. The blood leaped quicker in Robin's veins. So Shining Mark was in town? Very soon now there would be an end to this coil in which he had been entangled so long. One way or the other it would be finished. If Mark opened war on sight it would be an even break—and Robin asked no more, wanted no more. And if Steele hesitated the fraction of a second then he would get the drop on him and Shining Mark would go to Fort Benton alive to answer before the law for his misdeeds. Even with his sweetheart in his arms Robin's instinct was to seek Steele and get it over.

As he made a move to put May's arms aside, distantly, as if muffled, faintly through the open door two shots sounded so close together that an untrained ear might have heard but one. Then another single report.

After that dead silence, in which Robin, already on the top step, halted to listen.

"I wonder?" he said to May at his elbow.

He had no definite reason for wondering. When cowboys were in Big Sandy revolver shots were a commonplace. The cow-puncher in his exuberance used a six-shooter in much the same spirit a small boy sets off fire-crackers. His Colt was at once a weapon and a toy.

But there was no sound of hilarity, no light-hearted whooping. Neither of the J7 men had been in long enough to get drunk. All the Block S riders were on Little Eagle. There might be stray stock hands in town. Yet Robin was troubled by those shots, that uncommon stillness which followed. It was a scant two hundred yards to the hotel, the Silver Dollar, the other saloons.

Not a sound, not a voice, was uplifted in that hush.

"That's funny. I'm going over."

"Robin—please!"

"I got to," he said desperately.

He pressed a kiss on her lips, shook off her clutching hands, and ran. He glanced back once. May stood where he left her looking after him, the raking sun rays striking golden gleams

on her head. Through Robin's mind flashed the thought that it might be his last sight of her. But he went on quickly. If he met Shining Mark and luck was against him at any rate her kiss was sweet on his lips.

The corpulent host of the hotel stood outside his barroom door.

"What was the shootin'?" Robin asked.

"Somet'ing happen ober dere, yes," the man said placidly. "Everybody go to see. Vot iss, I do not know, already yet."

Robin crossed the street, walked in through the open door of Monty's Place, alert, nerves tense, looking first of all for sight of a lean, dark face with gray eyes that held malice whenever they rested on him.

And Shining Mark was almost the first man he saw. But there was no malice in his eyes now. He was stretched full-length on the floor, a white-handled Colt three feet from his outspread fingers. A shaft from the sinking sun played on his face through a window and a fly buzzed over him in the yellow beam.

Adam Sutherland sat in a chair. Men stood about him in a circle. A professional looking person in a white shirt, with his sleeves rolled up, was swathing a bandage about Sutherland's naked middle.

The old man looked up at Robin and smiled.

"I beat you to him," he said a little hoarsely. "He was on the warpath an' I settled his hash."

Robin said nothing. There was nothing to say. Death is sobering. No one talked much. When a man did speak he lowered his voice. Someone appeared with a canvas and spread it over Shining Mark. Even old Mayne, bearing all the marks of drunkenness which made his tongue wag always beyond all restraint, looked silently at Sutherland and kept still. The man who owned the saloon said to Robin:

"Lucky Doc happened to be here. Came up from Havre to look after a sick woman. So we got him right off."

"There you are, Mr. Sutherland," the doctor stood back and surveyed his handiwork. "Rest easy for a few days and you'll be as good as ever. I'll look in in the morning and dress that again. Better get a rig to take you over to your house."

"Shucks." Sutherland stood up and tucked in his shirt, wav-

ing off the men who would have supported him. "I don't need nobody but Tyler to help me home. A scratch like that. Shucks!"

Robin lent him his arm. They passed out the door, crossed the dusty street, Sutherland leaning on Robin, walking slowly. As they cleared the hotel, May watching from the porch saw them and came on flying feet.

"Oh," she cried, and again, "Oh, dad, dad!"

"It's nothin' *a*-tall. Now don't fuss, for the love of Mike. I'm all right. It's all over. Let's not have any shoutin'."

May took his other arm. They passed up the steps, inside, into Sutherland's bedroom.

"Now you leave us be, May," he said. "I want to talk to Robin."

"Please, daddy, tell me," she begged. "Are you hurt badly? I must know."

"No, girl, I ain't, and that's God's truth," he answered. "If I was I'd tell you. You ain't the screamin' kind. A bullet ripped up the flesh between my ribs, an' that's all. You seen me tore up a heap worse, one time. There's nothin' to worry about. You run along."

She kissed him and left the room. Sutherland sat down on the edge of his bed, eased himself to the pillows, grinned feebly.

"I ain't so young as I used to be," he mumbled to Robin. "I want to get my wind for a spell. Then you can pull off my boots an' help me undress."

He shut his eyes. Robin stood waiting, silent.

In a minute or so old Adam spoke again.

"There. I felt kinda wabbly but it's gone now. Give me a hand."

Robin helped him get ready for bed, put his clothes away in a closet.

"I'll be off my feet for a spell, I reckon," Sutherland began to talk with something of his old vigor. "You'll have to be a sort of general superintendent, Tyler. Pick a good man out of your crew to run the J7. Leave Boyd *segundo* on the home wagon till you can take it over yourself. Run the Block S on them cattle you got. We'll keep 'em, every darned hoof. Well, I expect they stole quite a few from old Mayne, so you better mark, say, about a hundred head for him. I guess that's all for

just now. You'll have to be in an' out of here pretty frequent while I'm on my back."

"Why did you tangle with Mark Steele?" Robin demanded. "Why didn't you leave him to me? It was my job."

"Mine too. He stole from me. He murdered a man I thought a lot of. He was a dirty dog all around. He give that fool girl of Mayne's a raw deal. I felt kinda responsible, because I put him in a position to do some of them things. I been boilin' inside the last two or three days. An' he was makin' breaks about you here in town. He was bad an' he was game. I didn't feel like lettin' you take a chance.

"Gosh darn it, this hole in my ribs don't amount to much, but it sure hurts," he complained. "No, kid, I couldn't let you go up against that *hombre*. I've lived my life an' it don't matter so much. This kid of mine thinks a heap of you. I couldn't let you go against as hard a proposition as Mark Steele. An' there was no time to wait for deputies. You would 'a' gone after him in spite of hell an' high water the minute you knew he was in town. So I went after him myself. I've stood out against gun play for years now. But you notice I ain't sheddin' no tears."

"Nor me," Robin replied. "Only I wish you hadn't took him off my hands at your own risk."

"Shucks," Sutherland rumbled. "You take the runnin' of the Block S off *my* hands an' we'll call it square. If there's anything in what I've had to listen to from May the last few days it's all in the family anyhow."

"You mean that?" Robin asked.

"Yes. You'll do," Sutherland grinned. "I was only joshin' you at the ranch last week. Wanted to see how you'd take it. I'd trust May's judgment in a matter of that kind, even if I doubted my own—which I don't. Hit the trail an' tell her how the play come up with Mark—an' tell Lum Yip to bring me some ice water."

Robin delivered this order to the Chinese boy. Then he found May, told her briefly what had happened. She dashed off to her father's room again. In a minute she came back, flushed, laughing.

"Isn't he the grandest old person," she said to Robin. "Do you know what he said to me? He said: 'Get to blazes out of here and leave me rest! Go an' plague that fellow you're goin'

to marry. He'll be sorry when he gets to know what he's got on his hands as well as I do.' "

"Huh!" Robin grunted. "If the fellow lives till he's sorry he'll beat Methuselah's record for old age."

"Let's go out on the porch," she suggested.

Robin stood with his arms about her looking off toward the blue dome of Old Centennial, the sharp cone of Shadow Butte. The sun dipped low, its rim touching the horizon. Distant windows flashed like heliographs. A cool breeze fluttered the porch awnings.

In his mind's eye Robin could see all the beauty of those distant hills, the far reach of the plains. Something seemed to have been mysteriously restored to him, some dark cloud blown away, something seemed to have set his heart singing and uplifted him with a strangely comforting sense of peace and security.

He drew the girl up close to him, and they stood for a long time in silence, Robin's fingers playing hide and seek in the tangle of her yellow hair.

THE END

Now that you have finished this book, you will probably be interested in other POPULAR LIBRARY editions of successful novels (formerly priced at $2 or more) now obtainable in this format at 25c per copy on all newsstands. Published by POPULAR LIBRARY, INC., 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y.

POPULAR LIBRARY

Books of proven merit

WILD WEST

By Bertrand W. Sinclair

Rustlers had long been stealing from Montana cattle outfits when Robin Tyler, rep for the Bar M Bar during the Block S roundup, saw Mark Steele, the Block S ramrod, hazing cows into a hidden canyon, and learned that Steele was the secret owner of the T Bar S iron, whose cows showed a miraculous increase each year.

Trying to catch Steele red-handed, Robin tipped his hand. And Steele, a gunman, trapped Robin, who had never owned a gun, in a line cabin and decided to kill him.

Robin pulled through that ruckus and went on the dodge. But he came back — this time with a smoking Colt — to start a wholesale cleanup on the Montana rangeland!

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES

POPULAR LIBRARY

complete • unabridged

180 Bertrand W. Sinclair • WILD WEST POPULAR LIBRARY

POPULAR LIBRARY

HOT LEAD FOR BEEF RUSTLERS